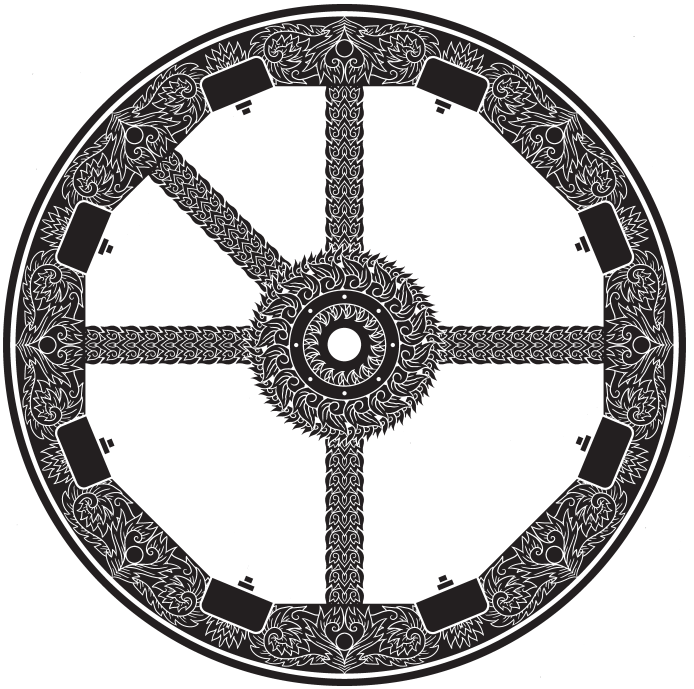
the Burning Wheel



Fantasy Roleplaying System

Gold Edition

Credit Due

Original Concept
Luke Crane and Dan Abram

Burning Wheel Concept and Design
Luke Crane

Burning Wheel Development
Chris Allingham, Luke Crane, Radek Drozdalski, Ian Marshall, Thor Olavsrud, Rich Soto and Peter Tierney

Circles Concept
Thor Olavsrud

Character Burner Development
Luke Crane, Pete Tierney, Radek Drozdalski, Thor Olavsrud, Chris "Master Burner" Allingham, Aaron Brown, Rich Soto, Danaher Dempsey, George Thompson and Mike VanHelder

Trait, Skill and Spell Help
Pete Tierney, Thor Olavsrud, Radek Drozdalski and Bob Doherty

Additional Advice and Development
Don Corcoran, Jason Roberts, Ron Edwards, Jared Sorensen, D. Vincent Baker, George Thompson, Kaare Berg, Alexander Cherry, Tony Hamilton, Wilhelm Fitzpatrick, Louis Nava and the most sagacious and wise members of RPG.net, indie-rpgs.com, nerdnyc.com and burningwheel.org

Content Editor
Thor Olavsrud

Copy Editor
Rich Forest

Head Wizard
Chris Allingham

Fight Captains
Ian Marshall, Jacob Norwood

Founder of Dynasties
Bob Doherty

Speaker of the Secret Language
Radek Frozdalski

Proofreading
Thor Olavsrud, Topi Makkonen, Mayuran Tiruchelvam, Alexander Newman, Drozferatu

Burning Wheel Gold Development
Luke Crane, Thor Olavsrud, Radek Drozdalski, Anthony Hersey, Jake Norwood, Topi Makkonen, Rich Soto, Michael Prescott, Keith Senkowski, Carly Bogen, Jared Sorensen, Wilhelm Fitzpatrick

Grandsire of the Elves
Bob Doherty

Burning Internets
Colin Cathexis Booth

Cave Troll
Andy Action

Charts and Sheets
Ben Morgan

Cover Illustrations
Kurt Komoda

Burning Wheel on the Web
www.burningwheel.com
www.nerdnyc.com
www.rpg.net

Burning Wheel Spot Illustrations and Thumbnails

Rebekah "Spyder" Bennington, Kev Sather, Dan Schenström and Dan Licht; Pentagram Wizard by Michael Sorensen. Wheel Shooting Flames Graphic and Mounted Knight by Colin Theriot.

Section Page Illustrations

Kev Sather

Character Burner Illustrations

Fire Folios: Kurt Komoda

Character Burner Front Page: Mark Smylie (www.artesiaonline.com)

Iconic Characters: Jordan Worley

Elves: Kurt Komoda

Dwarves: Chris Moreno

Men: Jordan Worley

Orcs: Peter Bergting

Revised Thank Yous…

Bob Doherty, Jason Costa, Jesse MacDonald, Jon Babcock and Brian Dunderdale; you know who you are. Hart Crane, my amazing brother. Pete Tierney, without whom this game would simply not have been completed. Brennan Taylor, for his laugh. Aaron Brown, for being cool and sane during my bouts of overwrought drama. Thor Olavsrud who appeared on the scene in the nick of time—to save me from myself. Radek, it's just no fun without you (\m/). Michael S. Miller, D. Vincent Baker, Jared Sorensen, Jake Norwood and Ron Edwards for continuing to take me to school. Jason Roberts, for those intense and fun game design sessions. Ralph Mazza, for the down to earth support and insight. Kaare Berg, for feeding me and keeping me healthy with his amazing actual play posts. Oscar Rodriguez, Phil Wedel, Neil Goodrich, and Keith Senkowski for their awesome and unholy mixture of darkness and the Wheel. Judd Karlman, for coming up with so many damn cool ideas. Rich Soto, Chris Allingham, Andy Markham, Danaher Dempsey and Dan Abram for putting up with me and still having a good time.

Thanks to Mark Smylie for kindly donating his excellent talents to making the Wheel look even better.

Thank you to everyone who has read, talked about, debated, defended, explained, demoed, purchased, played and run the game since 2002! You're the best fans ever.

Extra Thank You On Top

To Ken Hite, who, I believe, has impeccable taste. If you like this game, and you see Ken at a con, say a polite, "Thank you."

Gold Thank Yous

Carly Bogen, Anthony Hersey, Topi Makkonen, Jake Norwood, Patrick Riegert, Michael Prescott, Brodie Bensend, Devin Binger, Colin Booth, Katie Bodie, Megan McCoy, Mel Camp, Andy Action, Jon Slack, Kyle Davis, John E Bogart, Megan McFerren and Wilhelm Fitzpatrick who has a very keen mind for details (that I think are in the rules, but are not). And Abby Bell, for the Silmarillion—way back in 1991.

And let us not forget Danny and Mike at the Compleat Strategist. They'll never let *me* forget it if I don't thank them.

Gold Dedication

This book is dedicated to a lost, confused 19-year old boy. Follow your dreams, dumb-ass, but be careful what you wish for. You might get it—and then what the hell will you do?

A Special Nod

To Barbara Tuchman, JRR Tolkien and to Ursula K. Le Guin for continuing to inspire me.

Burning Wheel, the Adventure Burner, the Character Burner, the Magic Burner and the Monster Burner are trademarks (™) of Luke Crane. The five-spoked wheel logo is a registered trademark (®) of Luke Crane. The Burning Wheel is © 2011 Luke Crane.

ISBN: 978-0-9836458-0-1
Printed in the United States at Cushing-Malloy, Inc. Ann Arbor, Michigan.
Gold Edition First Printing

Contents

Foreword 6

the Hub of the Wheel

It Revolves on This 9

Elements of Character 17

the Spokes

Testing Your Abilities 24

Advancing Abilities 40

Beliefs, Instincts and Traits 53

The Artha Wheel 61

The Spokes in Play 72

the Character Burner

Fire in the Garden 77

Character Burning 81

Dwarven Lifepaths 110

The Halls of the Dwarves 118

Elven Lifepaths 131

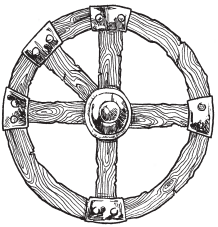
The Ages of Elves 139

Lifepaths of Man 163

The Kingdoms of Man 198

Orc Lifepaths 228

The Hate of Orcs 235



the Lists

Skill List 252
Trait List 310

the Rim

Wheel Meets Road 357
Steel 360
Resources 366
Relationships, Circles, Affiliations and Reputations 377
Duel of Wits 388
Range and Cover 403
Fight 424
Weapons 463
Armor and Shields 474
Anatomy of Injury 484
Sorcery 499
Emotional Magic 522
Natural Magic 528
Distance and Movement 530
Riding and Mounted Combat 533
Materials 541
Heroic and Supernatural 544

Appendices

Playing the Game 548
Weapons Appendix 554
The Die of Fate 559
Burning Rogues 562
Index of Headings 572
Bibliography 599

Foreword

At their core, the Burning Wheel books are instruction manuals on how to play. Luke and company have never wasted much ink on why to play their game. Perhaps because when one sees *how* to play the game, the *why* becomes clear.

So how do you play Burning Wheel? Fight for what you believe. Or, since it's a roleplaying game: Fight for what your character believes. Everything else in the rules tells either how to craft that character's beliefs or how to fight for them.

Burning Wheel's character creation drips with character history. History breeds conflict. Conflict means taking a stand. What will your character stand for?

Burning Wheel's core mechanics, advancement and Artha rules demand more-than-usual attention from the player. Skill or stat advancement isn't an afterthought, but rather a crucial part of the game. The decision to solve a problem with cold steel or silken words isn't just one of better numerical values—it's a question of who you, the player, want your character to become. Every action—pass or fail—is growth. Every decision affects how your character matures, shifts, changes. Even little decisions impact the character in permanent, subtle ways.

The Wheel's Rim, those "crunchy bits" that players like me thrive on, builds tension when the heat is on by putting more control into the player's hands. Burning Wheel is a game, and like all good games, it requires skill to play. To really enjoy Burning Wheel requires some investment in Burning Wheel. You, the player, have to care. You have to believe.

I believe in Burning Wheel.

Like a Burning Wheel character, I'm an amalgam of my experiences: military brat, missionary in a foreign land, veteran of the Iraq War, husband and father, and historical European martial artist. For each of these things, the *why* is built into the *how*. I love each of these parts of my life because of how I lived them. If life is a game, then I love my experiences because of how I played them.

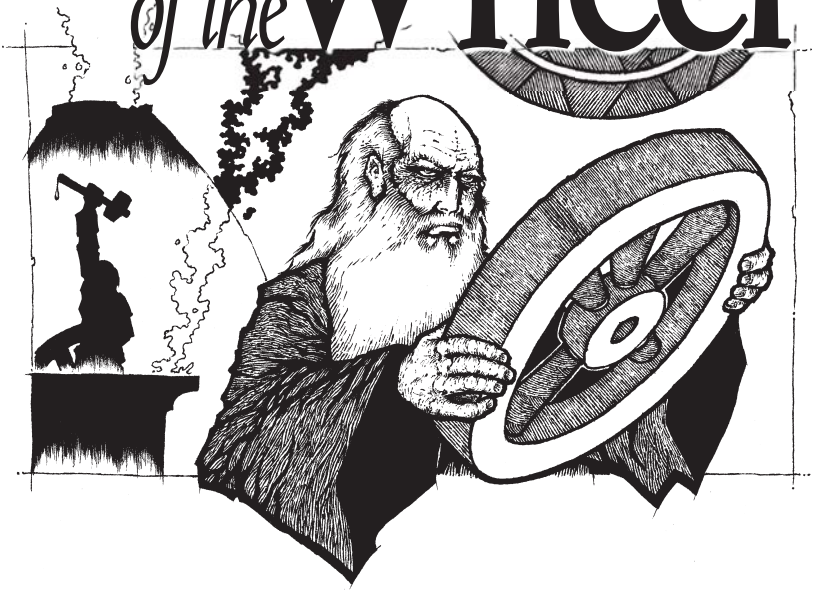
Burning Wheel's why is built into Luke and company's extensive how. The game is meant to be played as written. Each rule has been lovingly crafted—and now, many of them re-crafted—to support player-driven stories of white-knuckled action, heart-rending decisions and triumph against the odds. Burning Wheel Gold is the result of a decade of such stories. It's not a "fix" of Burning Wheel Revised or Classic. It's a new how.

May you enjoy discovering the why as much as I will.

Jake Norwood
March 2011

Jake Norwood is the creator and author of the acclaimed (and out of print) roleplaying game The Riddle of Steel. *He is also a veteran of the 101st Airborne (Rakkasans!), president of the HEMA Alliance (www.hemaalliance.com) and an internationally recognized German longsword fighter and teacher. He lives in Maryland with his wife, daughter and mom-in-law.*

the Hub of the Wheel



But need alone is not enough to set power free: there must be knowledge.

—Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*

It Revolves on This

The Burning Wheel is a roleplaying game. Its mood and feel are reminiscent of the lands created by Ursula K. Le Guin, Stephen R. Donaldson and JRR Tolkien in their works of fantasy fiction. It is also heavily influenced by the brilliant medieval historical accounts of Barbara Tuchman and Desmond Seward; a dirty, complicated world full of uncertainty, but not without hope or opportunity for change.

Unlike many other roleplaying games, there is no set world in which you play. Burning Wheel is an heir to a long legacy of fantasy roleplaying games, most of which contain far better worlds and settings than could be provided here. Also, it is my strong belief that players of these games are adept at manufacturing their own worlds for gameplay; my own world pales in comparison to what you will create.

In the game, players take on the roles of characters inspired by history and works of fantasy fiction. These characters are a list of abilities rated with numbers and a list of player-determined priorities. The synergy of inspiration, imagination, numbers and priorities is the most fundamental element of Burning Wheel. Expressing these numbers and priorities within situations presented by the game master (GM) is what the game is all about.

Though the game has no world full of ethics and laws, the rules do contain a philosophy that implies a certain type of place. There are consequences to your choices in this game. They range from the very black and white, "If I engage in this duel, my character might die," to the more complex, "If my character undertakes this task, he'll be changed, and I don't know exactly how." Recognizing that the system enforces these choices will help you navigate play. I always encourage players to think before they test their characters. Are you prepared to accept the consequences of your actions?

The in-game consequences of the players' decisions are described in this rulebook. The moral ramifications are left to you.

Using This Book

This book, Burning Wheel Gold, is the updated, revised and combined edition of Burning Wheel Revised. It contains both the Burning Wheel Fantasy Roleplaying System and the Character Burner. These books are identified with wood and flame borders respectively.

The basic rules for play are presented first. We recommend starting by reading the first 75 pages of the Burning Wheel. After digesting the basics, make—or "burn," in our parlance—a character. Then get some friends together and play the game! After you've played, explore the rules further to see what you'd like to add to your game.

Voices in My Head

As you read through the rules, you will encounter three little imps. These imps represent the author's voice in certain parts of the text.

Basic rules text is not preceded by any of the imps. This "rules voice" is used to convey most of the information in the game. The imps offer commentary on the rules.

This character indicates that I am asking the reader to take note. The text following him is written in my voice, rather than the rules voice. I call this guy the *Instructor*. You can call him "Luke" if you want to. For example: "Thanks Luke, that was very helpful!"

This is the *Ranter*. He rears his ugly head whenever I am yelling about something. This usually comes in the form of harsh advice or warnings regarding the limits of Burning Wheel. Take what he says with a grain of salt. For example, "I wish Luke would shut up!"

The *Weeper* is a strange one, prone to outbursts of tears at the oddest times; sometimes tears of sadness, sometimes fear and sometimes tears of joy. He frequently squirts when death or something else very scary is near. "What's he carrying on about now?"

The Flow of the Game

Burning Wheel is best played sitting around a table with your friends—face to face. It is inherently a social game. The players interact with one another to come to decisions and have the characters undertake actions.

One of you takes on the role of the game master. The GM is responsible for challenging the players. He also plays the roles of all of those

characters not taken on by other players; he guides the pacing of the events of the story; and he arbitrates rules calls and interpretations so that play progresses smoothly.

Everyone else plays a protagonist in the story. Even if the players decide to take on the roles of destitute wastrels, no matter how unsavory their exploits, they are the focus of the story. The GM presents the players with problems based on the players' priorities. The players use their characters' abilities to overcome these obstacles. To do this, dice are rolled and the results are interpreted using the rules presented in this book.

Sheets of Paper

Each player is required to keep a written record of his character. Character sheets are provided on our website at www.burningwheel.org for just this purpose. Characters in Burning Wheel evolve and grow as play progresses, so I recommend using a pencil to mark the sheet. There are a few other sheets used in play to keep track of moment to moment stuff, but they'll be discussed later down the line.

The GM has the responsibility to keep notes on the characters and monsters that he uses. These don't need to be fully fleshed out—a few numbers usually suffice. But there are certain characters that will need to be described fully in order to give them their due in play.

Dice

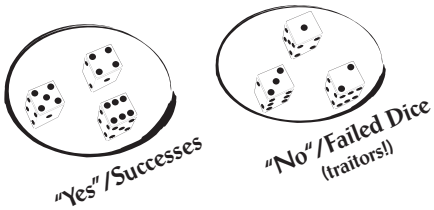
D6

Burning Wheel uses common six-sided dice for all rolls. From here on out, these dice are referred to as D6 (which is gamer-talk for "six-sides"). Groups of them are referred to as 3D6, 4D6, 5D6, or 3D, 4D, 5D for short. How's that for confusing gamer parlance?

Difficulty Number

Dice in Burning Wheel are rolled in handfuls (or pools) of usually three to six dice. In each roll, every die is counted as its own result, either a "yes" or a "no." The more "yeses" the better. Any die that comes up as a "no" result is a traitor to your cause and doesn't count toward success.

The number needed for the die to achieve the "yes" result is called the *difficulty number*. For the purposes of explaining the rules, a "yes" result is a 4, 5 or 6 on a die. A "no" result is a 1, 2 or 3. (Traitors!) There are only two instances where this changes, and they will be discussed later.



Successes

When a die rolls a "yes" result, we call it a success. After the dice are rolled, count up all your successes.

Rolling a handful of five dice, my dismal luck gives me a 1, 2, 2, 4, 5 result. Two of the dice came up 4 or higher. Thus I rolled two successes.

When a player rolls dice, he needs enough successes that his character passes the tests set before him in the game.

Ability Ratings

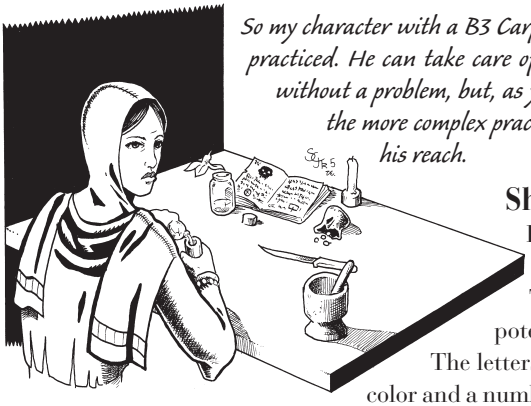
Exponent

The number next to your character's stats, attributes and skills indicates how many dice to roll when that ability is called upon. We here at Burning Wheel HQ call that number the exponent of the ability because it is the representative of the character's actual ability in that area (not because it stands for X to the Nth power). Throughout the text, you'll see me refer to an ability as exponent 3. That's just me saying, "You roll three dice for that, bub."

Expertise by Exponent

Below is a list of exponents (exp) in Burning Wheel and what they imply about the ability they represent. Hopefully, this will help you get a feel for the system:

Exp 1 is naturally disinclined, crippled or utterly incompetent
Exp 2 is untrained, raw, weak or unpracticed
Exp 3 is nominally trained and practiced
Exp 4 is competent; everyday stuff doesn't pose a challenge
Exp 5 is expert
Exp 6 is near mastery
Exp 7 is excellence
Exp 8 is total mastery, complete understanding
Exp 9 is uncanny; incomprehensibly good
Exp 10 is as near perfection as the system allows



So my character with a B3 Carpentry is considered trained and practiced. He can take care of all the basic stuff of his trade without a problem, but, as you will see, with just three dice, the more complex practices of his profession are beyond his reach.

Shade

Every ability number in Burning Wheel is accompanied by a letter. This letter indicates the "level of potential," or shade, of that ability. The letters, in turn, correspond to both a color and a number. B is black shade and means the player rolling for that ability needs 4s or better for successes. G is gray shade and needs 3s or better for successes. Gray shades indicate heroic potential. W is white shade and needs 2s or better. White shade is for supernatural potential.

Having a G or W shade ability is the only time the difficulty number for a roll varies from 4 (or B shade). Changing an ability's shade is discussed in the Character Burner and Artha sections of this book.

When to Roll

Burning Wheel is very much a game. While players undertake the roles of their characters and embellish their actions with performance and description, rolling the dice determines success or failure and, hence, where the story goes.

Tests

You make tests during dramatic moments, when the outcome is uncertain.

The Orcs are coming. I need to reinforce this door to hold them off (even for just a little while). I test my Carpentry skill.

Carpentry B 3

Shade

Exponent

Ability (in this case, a skill)

When I want to test my character's Carpentry skill—my character must reinforce this door before the Orcs come!—I roll three dice.

Tests are the teeth of the gears of this game. Without tests, nothing catches and moves forward. In fact, in a situation involving conflict, a test is required. A player cannot affect another character without testing an ability to back it up.

Testing abilities is a good thing! Not only do tests drive the story by providing tangible results for our actions, they allow the character a chance to improve his abilities and attain greater heights.

Obstacles to Overcome

So now we know how to test an ability—roll the number of dice indicated. 4s or better count as successes, the more successes the better.

Players need to generate successes in order to pass more difficult tests—tests that require multiple successes to overcome. The number of successes needed to pass a test is called the *obstacle (Ob)*. It is the GM's role to assign appropriate obstacles based on the inherent complexity of the task at hand.

The GM refers to the Carpenter skill and determines that reinforcing a door is a routine task. Therefore, it's an Ob 2 test. I need to roll two successes on the three dice of my character's Carpentry skill.

The higher the obstacle, the more difficult the test, and the more skilled and lucky the character will need to be to pass it.

Difficulty by Obstacle

Obstacles range from 1 to 10 (only occasionally getting higher): 1 is the easiest, 10 the most difficult. According to the exponent list, a character who is competent in an area has four dice to roll for that ability. Four dice requiring 4s or better means that he can routinely pass tests of obstacle 1 or 2. He can pass obstacle 3 and 4 tests with some difficulty. Anything higher than obstacle 4 is too difficult. Since he can only roll four successes on four dice, Ob 5 or higher is out of his range. A character with an ability at exponent 5—an expert according to our list—can routinely hit obstacles 1 through 3, but will find obstacles 4 and 5 a bit difficult. Still, he can hit an Ob 5 unassisted, while a skill exponent of 4 cannot. A character with a master level ability—exponent 8—can achieve great things rolling six, seven or eight successes, but even he can't reach Ob 10 unaided.

This simple table below visually depicts the range of difficulty by ability level in Burning Wheel. Light gray is easy. Medium gray is hard. Dark gray is too hard for an ability of that exponent to accomplish unassisted.

	Ob 1	Ob 2	Ob 3	Ob 4	Ob 5	Ob 6	Ob 7	Ob 8	Ob 9	Ob 10
Exp 1										
Exp 2								*Too*		
Exp 3								*Hard*		
Exp 4										
Exp 5					*Hard*					
Exp 6										
Exp 7										
Exp 8			*Easy*							
Exp 9										
Exp 10										

It is the philosophy of the system that some tasks are either too complex to accomplish without help or simply too difficult to accomplish at all. Sometimes, high obstacles will force players to be creative and think of another way around.

Absolute Difficulty

The difficulty of a test does not vary according to the skill of its user. The difficulty is set and the user must muster his skill and advantages to overcome it.

Ob 1 A simple act done with little thought
Ob 2 An act performed routinely at your job
Ob 3 An act you can accomplish if you concentrate
Ob 4 A risky act
Ob 5 An act that requires expertise
Ob 6 An act that requires a heroic effort
Ob 7 An improbable feat
Ob 8 An act requiring preternatural ability or a lot of help
Ob 9 An act deemed nearly impossible
Ob 10 A miracle

Increasing Difficulty

Obstacles can be increased by problems like carrying a baby in a papoose on your back in a sword fight. That's +1 Ob to running around and fighting. Obstacles, once set, aren't reduced by the workarounds, tricks or fixes from the players. Those elements add dice to the ability to overcome the obstacle.

Open-Ended Rolls

Certain rolls in Burning Wheel are described as "open-ended." This means that any 6s rolled allow the player to pick up another die. If you hit your difficulty number or higher, it's a success. If you don't meet your difficulty number, the die is a traitor. If you roll a 6, it counts as a success and you get to roll another die!

Tests for Steel, Faith and any ability considered "magical" (Dwarven Arts, Elven Skill Songs or Sorcery, for example) are all open-ended rolls. Anything can happen.

Basic Dice in Brief

- We roll dice when a conflict arises.
- The number of dice rolled is determined by the character's relevant ability that applies to the conflict. You don't use Cooking to win a brawl. Know what I mean?
- The number of dice rolled is equal to the number next to the ability. This is called the exponent.
- For the majority of tests, 4s and better are successes. 3s and lower are traitors. This difficulty number is determined by the ability's shade.
- The obstacle is the inherent difficulty of the task being attempted. You need successes equal to the obstacle to pass the test.
- Open-ended rolls— 6s on Faith, Steel and magic-type tests—allow you to pick up another die and roll it again, hopefully adding more successes.

Elements of Character

Burning Wheel is a gritty game. It is designed so the characters appear and feel like human beings (or a similar analog). They bleed, strain and sweat—they have limitations, but are also lucky and miraculous.

Characters are the most important part of Burning Wheel. They are the players' incarnations in the game, and nothing happens in the game world that doesn't involve a player character.

Let's take a look at what comprises a character in this system: He has stats, attributes and skills; Beliefs, Instincts and traits; Resources, relationships, reputations, affiliations and Circles; and of course, he's got his gear and stuff that he totes around with him.

All of these elements affect how the character is played, and thus how the game is shaped by the character's actions. To help you get a feel for the system, these aspects are described in general terms in the following section. Individual uses of these abilities are detailed in later sections.

Stats

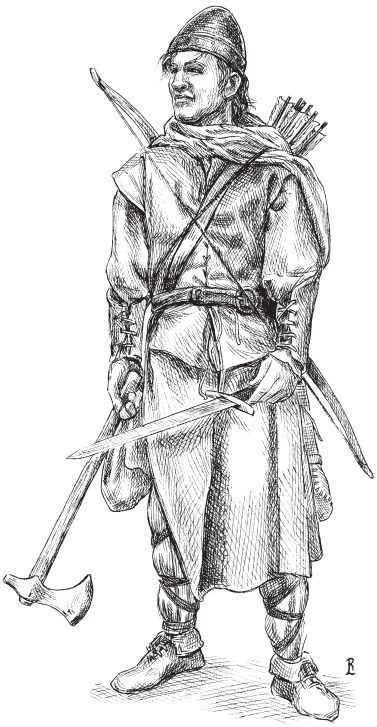
There are six stats that describe a character's basic mental and physical composition in Burning Wheel: Will, Perception, Agility, Speed, Power and Forte.

Will

Will is the social stat—it represents the character's strength of mind, empathy and social intelligence. It is the basis of a number of skills and attributes.

Perception

Perception is the awareness and mental acuity stat. It's rolled all the time in game. Players always have their characters searching for information or clues, and this is the stat tested in those situations.



Agility
Agility represents the hand-eye coordination of the character. It is tested when a character must keep hold of something, snatch something or toss an object. It is also the basis for many martial skills.

Speed
This quirky stat represents how fast the character moves and how coordinated he is overall. It's rolled all the time in game, from fleeing your enemies to ducking a blow. It is also the basis for the Dancing, Stealthy and Climbing skills.

Power
Power represents physical strength. It's rolled in game when the character has to push something over or grapple with someone. It is also the basis for damage in melee attacks.

Forte
Forte (pronounced "FORT") represents the character's physical mettle—how tough and durable he is. Forte is rarely rolled in game, but it is a part of two crucial attributes: Health and Mortal Wound.

Attributes
Attributes are derived from stats and are used for more subtle tests than the raw instances described above. They can also be avenues to additional abilities, available only to certain characters.

Health
The Health attribute is derived from Will and Forte. It is used in game to recover from injury and resist the effects of pain and fatigue.

Reflexes
The Reflexes attribute is calculated from Perception, Agility and Speed. It is used to determine how often a character acts during a fight. Reflexes isn't tested like other abilities.

Steel

Steel is a complex attribute that combines elements from different stats and the character's background to determine how steady a character's nerves are. Steel has its own section and is discussed in detail there.

Emotional Attributes

Some characters possess an additional ability tied into their emotional makeup: Faith, Grief, Greed and Hatred are a few examples. These attributes are factored by answering questions about the character, and are tested by special circumstances in game. Emotional Attributes have their own chapter and are further detailed in the individual lifepath chapters.

Mortal Wound

Mortal Wound combines Power and Forte to set the point at which the character dies in the injury mechanics. Mortal Wound is never tested; it is just a marker.

Shade

It is possible to gain abilities beyond the mundane. Your character can have a heroic Power stat or a supernatural Dance skill. These special abilities are denoted by a different shade—gray or white.

Skills

In Burning Wheel, a skill is a specialized field of knowledge or particular technique known by the character. A skill allows a character to achieve his goals more easily than by using stats. Examples of skills include: Animal Husbandry, Mending, Sorcery, Sword and Ugly Truth.

Characters tend to have many skills—from four to twelve is normal. Twenty is not unheard of.

Beliefs

A player must determine the three top priorities for his character. These are fundamental ideas important to the character. They are a combination of the outlook of the character and the goals of the player.

I must prove my worth to my companions, so I will guide them through these caverns.

Beliefs are discussed in their own chapter in this book. Creating them is described in the Character Burner.

Instincts

Instincts are similar to Beliefs—they are player-determined priorities and reactions for the character. They are based on the character's experiences and have a tangible function.

An Instinct is essentially an "if/then" or "always/never" statement for the character's behavior. "If surprised, I draw my sword." The player is allowed to program these actions and reactions into his character. Therefore, he can be assured that his character will react within certain parameters whether the player explicitly states it or not at that moment in play.

Think of them as hardwired reactions from training and experience (and a little insurance the player takes out against the GM).

Instincts have their own section in this book. Creating them is discussed in the Character Burner.

Traits

Traits are quirks and odd abilities that the character acquires through the course of his life. A player starts by purchasing traits in character burning, but they will also be earned in play.

Traits affect a character's personality, his appearance, and even grant him special abilities. Where Beliefs and Instincts are relatively loosely defined, the role of traits in game is mechanically fixed.

Using traits is discussed in the Burning Wheel, creating and purchasing them is talked about in the Character Burner.

Resources and Circles

Resources

Whether wealthy or destitute, every character is assigned a Resources ability. Its starting exponent is determined by how the player spent his character's resource points in character creation. Thereafter, it is used like a skill in game. Its function is to determine how economically and financially solvent a character is: Can he afford to buy property? Can he keep his equipment in repair? Is he forced to beg for food and lodging? The Resources ability allows all of this to be determined by a roll of the dice.

Circles

Who does the character know from his days as an apprentice? Can he call on his former gang mates for help? Such questions are answered using the Circles ability. It's a measure of the character's social influence, and its scope is shaped by the character's lifepaths.

Gear and Stuff

No fantasy roleplaying game would be complete without *stuff*: Swords, armor, books, spells, clothes, shoes, lanterns, etc. All of the bits and pieces to make you feel right. In this game, gear augments an ability or reduces (or increases) a penalty. Swords augment your Power stat when your character is trying to kill someone. Lanterns reduce penalties for Perception tests in darkness. Clothes keep those social skill test obstacles down.

Gear is initially acquired in character burning. In play, gear is purchased via a Resources test or even just granted by the GM during appropriate scenes: a knight is granted a new sword and suit of armor by his liege, or a magic helmet is found in the burial mound of a long-dead god, for example.

Mostly though, gear is window dressing that adds detail to your world.

Magic

The last element of the game that needs to be mentioned is magic. In Burning Wheel, it comes in many forms.

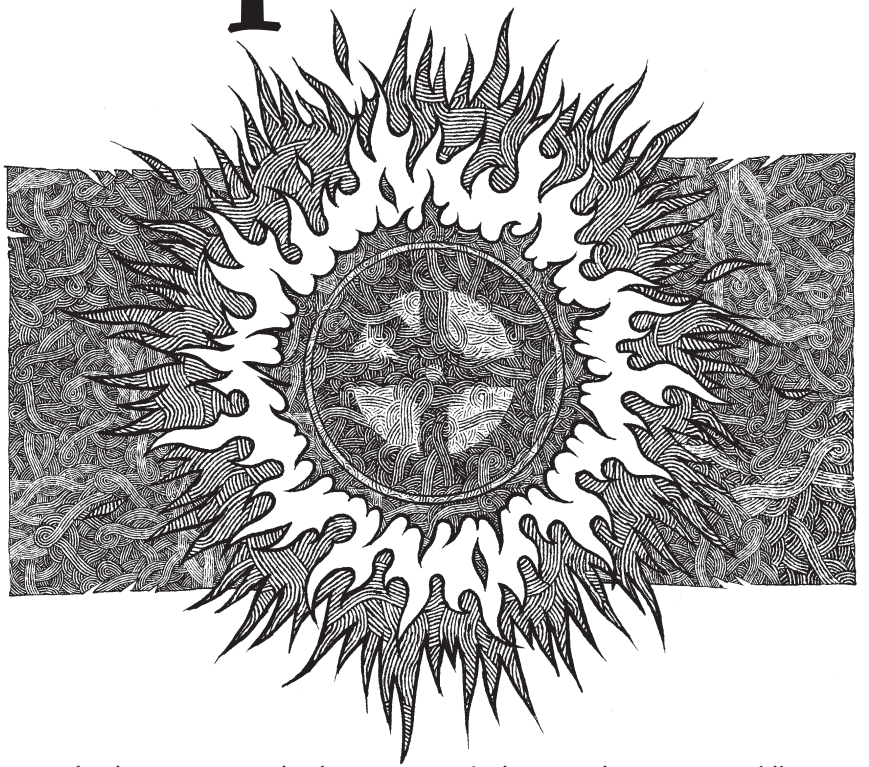
Magic makes possible what could not normally be done by human physical means or ingenuity. Not simply building the pyramids or preserving bodies for thousands of years, but sealing tombs with unbreakable spells and cursing those who desecrate them to die inexplicable deaths.

It is the unexplainable and the potent—mystical power over the elements. In game, this process is represented by Emotional Attributes—Faith, Grief, Hatred and Greed—and various magical skills like Summoning, Enchanting and Sorcery.

From Hub to Spokes

The rules for the elements touched on in this chapter are discussed in their individual sections. In the next section, we're going to look at the next level of the rules: how to test your abilities, how to advance, how to tell the other players what you want and how to get rewarded.

the Spokes



Who then may trust the dice at Fortune's throw? Who joins in worldly struggles such as these will be, when least prepared for it, laid low.

—Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*

Testing Your Abilities

Burning Wheel is very much a game to be played and manipulated for fun (and profit, sort of). Dice rolls called for by the GM and players are the heart of play. These are tests. They determine the results of conflicts and help drive the story.

Tests involve the character's abilities. Whether it's a Health test to recover from an injury, a Sorcery test to learn a new spell or a Perception test to spot a pursuer, these are the very fabric of the game. Characters + Situation + Tests = Game.

In the system, there are a few ways to roll dice to overcome obstacles. How the successes are counted depends on the desired outcome and the type of conflict. The following section discusses the basic test mechanics, plus the other ways we manipulate dice pools and obstacles.

Let's start with the core of the Burning Wheel system. We call it "Intent and Task."

Intent

What do you want do and why do you want your character to do it?

"I want to kill him!"

Great. "I kill him" is an intent. When declaring an action for a character, you say what you want and how you do it. That's the intent and the task.

When a player states "I kill him!" we know his intent. By describing how his character will undertake this intent, he defines the task. Clearly stating and linking the task and intent allows player and GM to determine what ability needs to be tested.

The result, whether or not the target actually dies, is determined by the results of a dice roll. Roll well and the character comes closer to accomplishing the stated intent.

Descriptions of the task are vital. Through them we know which mechanics to apply; acknowledging the intent allows us to properly interpret the results of the test.

Task

A task is a measurable, finite and quantifiable act performed by a character: attacking someone with a sword, studying a scroll or resting in an abbey. A task describes how you accomplish your intent. What does your character do? A task should be easily linked to an ability: the Sword skill, the Research skill or the Health attribute.

Inappropriate tasks are: "I kill him!" or "I convince him." Those are intents. After such pronouncements, the first question any Burning Wheel player asks should be: How? By what means? The answer, "I stab him with my knife," is an appropriate task description for a murderous character. "I persuade him to take my side by explaining his wife's affair with the cardinal." is appropriate in the second case.

What Ability Do I Roll?

Once the description of the intent and task has been stated at the table, the ability needed to complete that action is usually pretty obvious. Stabbing someone is going to require a Brawling or Knife test. Convincing another character requires a Persuasion or Falsehood test.

When adjudicating a test, start with the descriptions in the Elements of Character. If you need more detail, refer to the Character Burner and the skill list.

If it is ever unclear what ability to roll, the GM should question the player. Get him to describe his action in detail, until what needs to happen is clear to both parties. Once the ability to be tested is established, then the dice are rolled.

Standard Tests

In a standard test, the GM sets the obstacle based on the skill listing, the conflict interaction or his own judgement. A player rolls his character's ability and needs to come up with a number of successes equal to or greater than the obstacle. Doing so passes the test.

The player wants his character to pick a lock. The GM consults the skill list to find the obstacle. He sets the obstacle at 3 based on the type of lock. Thus, the player needs to roll three or more successes from his character's skill in order to successfully pick the lock.

Versus Tests

When two characters come into opposition, a versus test is made—one ability against the other. The character with more successes wins the contest.

Moqtada is haggling with a shipwright. I test his G5 Haggling against the shipwright's B5. I roll four successes on my dice. The GM rolls three successes for the shipwright. My character, Moqtada, wins the test.

If one character is an aggressor by intent and one is a defender, ties go to the defender. If both characters are aggressors, a tie means that neither side has gained an edge and they are deadlocked. Either the tie must be accepted as the result, a trait must be called on to break it or the contest must be continued in another arena. Do not reroll the test.

If an assassin is sneaking into a compound, he tests his Stealthy skill. A night watchman tests his Observation skill to spot him. If a tie results, the watchman wins the test—he is the "defending" character.

If, on the other hand, a burglar is caught in a raid at his favorite local bar, the player tests his Inconspicuous versus the watch's Observation. If a tie results, the burglar is the defending character, and he wins the test.

Graduated Tests

Occasionally, a test has no fixed obstacle. It is simply a matter of testing an ability and noting how many successes are generated. This is often the case for research, searching an area or other knowledge-based skills. The amount of information distributed by the GM is directly dependent on the number of successes generated.

Thor asks the GM what his character can remember about the layout of his home village. Can he find the doctor's residence in the dark? He tests his character's Village-wise skill and comes up with two successes. This is pretty routine knowledge, so the GM nods the affirmative and describes the residence.

The information available in graduated tests is rated and judged along the standard obstacle difficulty paradigm. One success is obvious stuff, five successes is expert knowledge, and ten successes is a miraculous understanding. GMs can call for graduated tests if they want to use a skill to measure how well the character performs a particular action.

Linked Tests

Once in a while, the player characters will find themselves in a long-term or complex operation that requires many skills or abilities to overcome.

Sneaking out of a harbor and sailing through pirate-infested waters to a remote island, for example.

Linked tests can be performed by a single character with many skills, but more often they are undertaken by multiple characters complementing each other.

Note that in linked tests, the task happens across time—each test of skill comes at a certain juncture and leads to the next. It doesn't all happen at once.

Failure Behind, Success Ahead

When rolling for a linked test, if the character who tested before your character merely met his obstacle, you gain no benefit. If he exceeded his obstacle, your character gains a +1D advantage for his portion of the test. If the character who tested before you failed his test, then the obstacle for your portion is increased by one.

In the example above, the GM determines that this intent is going to require three tests: The Orc pirate must pass a Piloting test, the Priest Navigator must then pass a Navigation test and the Temple Guardian will test his Observation as he watches for pirates. In this case the Orc-player barely meets his obstacle. This doesn't affect the Navigator, who fails anyway. Luckily, the aged Temple Guardian passes his test, despite the increased obstacle.

The final result is that the ship finds its way to the island (success) but approaches from the wrong angle (failure)—she's spotted by pirates in the bay at the same time she spots them (success). The chase is on!

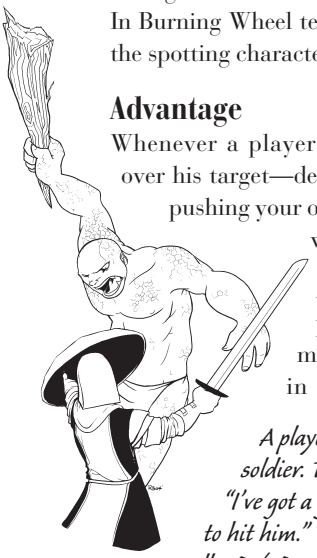
Time and Linked Tests

As you can see, linked tests are also a device that allows players to use the task resolution system to accomplish goals of a broader scope. Rather than just maneuvering a ship, a linked test can be used for a whole journey—which can be resolved within just a few minutes play.

Advantage and Disadvantage

The conditions surrounding a test can modify the base obstacle. Trying to shove someone off a roof is a versus Power test. If the roof is slippery, this is an advantage to the pusher. Such advantages give a bonus to the attacker.

Conversely, it's pretty easy to spot someone sitting quietly in the corner of a room. But if the room is dark, and there is a howling wind blowing through the windows, these conditions make it harder to spot that person. In Burning Wheel terms, the darkness and wind are disadvantages for the spotting character.



Advantage

Whenever a player can claim his character has a clear advantage over his target—definitively favorable conditions like higher ground, pushing your opponent onto an ice patch or a weight advantage in wrestling—he gains +1D to the ability being tested.

A player may only lobby for one +1D advantage per test. In order to gain this advantage, he must state how and why he deserves such a boon in one clear sentence—no situation lawyering.

A player wants his character to throw a rock and hit a nearby soldier. The character has an Agility of B4. The player declares: "I've got a good advantage standing on this cart. It's much easier to hit him." The GM agrees to this +1D advantage. Thus the player rolls 5D (4D+1D) vs Ob 2 (he needs two successes to hit the soldier).

In the case of social skill tests, good roleplay, keen description or just good timing can earn the advantage die.

The GM has final say over what is and isn't an advantage. If he thinks the target of such a leveraged attack has equally beneficial advantages, then no bonus need be granted. The GM can also add additional advantage dice if he thinks the character is in a strong position. If he disagrees with the player regarding the nature or benefit of an advantage, then no bonus is granted. Only one to two advantage dice should be granted to each roll (at maximum).

Disadvantage

Any time the GM feels that conditions put a character at a disadvantage, he must increase the obstacle of the test. Disadvantages come from myriad sources—the character is moving quickly, the light is dim, the air is smoky, the ground is slippery, the character doesn't speak the language well or he's dressed inappropriately. All disadvantages are cumulative—each one increases the obstacle by one.

Normally, hitting someone with a rock at such close range is an Ob 2 test. But there is smoke from funeral pyres partially obscuring the character's vision (+1 Ob). This disadvantage bumps his obstacle up to 3.

The final test would be Agility of B4 +1D (5D total) vs an Ob 3 from the smoke disadvantage.

Mixing Advantage and Disadvantage

As you may have noticed in the example above, advantages and disadvantages can be mixed. In fact, they should be. For each test, let players state their case for advantages. At the same time, the GM should lay out all the disadvantages present.

Also, advantages do not cancel disadvantage. They are both added into the test before the dice are cast. Obstacles go up to make tests harder; dice are added to make it easier.

Double Obstacle Penalty

Some rolls are penalized with a double obstacle penalty. This means you double the obstacle or the amount of successes your opponent rolls and then add modifiers. That's your final obstacle. Don't double the modifiers!

Carefully, Patiently, Quickly: Allocating Successes

There are four methods a player may use when testing abilities: A test may be made *carefully*, *patiently* or *quickly*, or by default, a test may be taken normally. Testing normally uses the standard rules described above. The other three methods each have a different effect on the roll or obstacle.

Carefully

Working carefully increases the time for a test by half, but it grants a +1D advantage. If a player wishes his character to work carefully, he must state this before the dice are rolled.

If the player fails a test in which he is working carefully, the result indicates he has run out of time—the bomb goes off, the guards burst in, the old man dies, etc. By working carefully, the player is allowing the GM to introduce a serious complication upon failure.

Patiently

Working patiently allows a player to allocate extra successes to the quality of the finished product. Extra successes can be used to embellish

a description or add a flourish. They are largely a narrative device. However, many skills have their own rules for allocating extra successes and their effects. These are described in their individual sections.

Extra successes may be allocated to working patiently after the dice are rolled.

Quickly

Working quickly allows a character to complete a task in a shorter amount of time. Successes over the obstacle allocated to working quickly reduce the overall time by 10% each—three successes over the obstacle reduces time by 30%. Successes may be allocated to working quickly after the dice are rolled. Time for tests is discussed a little further on in this chapter.

Mixing Methods

Players may have their characters work carefully, patiently and quickly all at once. To do so, they must describe their actions and inform the GM how they're allocating extra successes. If a player desires his character to work carefully, this must be stated before the dice are rolled. Each extra success can be applied to working either patiently or quickly.

Success

Now we have a grasp on a variety of ways to manipulate the dice pools for a test, but what happens after the dice have come to rest and the successes are counted? If the successes equal or exceed the obstacle, the character has succeeded in his goal—he achieved his intent and completed the task.

This is important enough to say again: Characters who are successful complete actions in the manner described by the player. A successful roll is sacrosanct in Burning Wheel and neither GM nor other players can change the fact that the act was successful. The GM may only embellish or reinforce a successful ability test.

"I kill him!" Rich shouts. The GM responds, "Test your Sword skill. That's what you're using, right?" Rich rolls his B5 Sword skill and produces an amazing five successes. The GM consults the Weapons chapter and Anatomy of Injury chapters. "Yep, that does it. He's a goner. Describe it for us, please!" Rich jumps from his chair, "I decapitate him like so and then stand rigid while making Bruce Lee noises."

Or: Pete announces, "I want to poison the wizard." The GM arches his eyebrow, "How so?" Pete's got a plan: "I'll sneak into the kitchen disguised as a Hound

Sergeant, then I'll Intimidate one of his slaves to take him poisoned tea in the guise of herbal medicine." The GM considers for a moment, "That's pretty good. You'll need to make a linked test with: Disguise, Inconspicuous and Intimidation, plus Hound-wise, I think." Pete nods and gets ready to burn some artha. If his rolls are successful, the wizard will be poisoned even though he didn't drop the poison directly in his mouth. Why? Because Pete stated his intent,described his task and the dice came up in his favor.

The most important criteria for passing a test is that play moves in the direction of the success, even if only momentarily.

"I want to humiliate him. They can't ignore me!" shouts Andy, enraged.

"How?" inquires the GM.

"I raise my voice and insult him in front of the entire party. I use my Conspicuous skill."

"Roll. Your obstacle is 3 to gain the attention of the crowd and be heard. Extra successes will go toward incensing them with the spectacle."

"Four successes."

"Your insults are heard flung across the room. Some eyebrows are raised. He stops walking away from you and turns, red in the face. It seems you have a moment in which you are the center of attention."

In this example, the player states his intent and task straight away: humiliate his opponent using shouts and insults while testing his Conspicuous skill. The GM embellishes on the result with the successful test. The target is humiliated and the GM tells the player how.

Failure

When the dice are rolled and don't produce enough successes to meet the obstacle, the character fails. What does this mean? It means the stated intent does not come to pass.

"I pick the lock quickly, before the guards come!" This is an easy intent to judge a failure for: The character doesn't get the lock open. Simple, right? But what if that's changed a bit. Failure doesn't have to mean the lock doesn't open. Look at the intent: "before the guards come." What if the character opens the lock just as the guards arrive? Suddenly, you have trouble—drama and action!

Two Directions

When a player sets out a task for his character and states his intent, it is the GM's job to inform him of the consequences of failure before the dice are rolled.

"If you fail this…" should often be heard at the table. Let the players know the consequences of their actions. Failure is not the end of the line, but it is complication that pushes the story in another direction.

Once that is said, everyone knows what's at stake and play can continue smoothly no matter what the result of the roll is.

Failure Complicates the Matter

When a test is failed, the GM introduces a complication.

"You can try to pick the lock, but you don't have much time. It is highly likely that the guards will return before you finish."

Try not to present flat negative results—"You don't pick the lock." Strive to introduce complications through failure as much as possible.

Death should only be the result of failure in the rarest, most dire situations. The GM must present the players with varied, twisted, occult and bizarre ramifications of their decisions. Death is only the last resort. And more often than not, a player will let everyone know when he is prepared to risk his character's life for success.

Lastly, the rules for specific subsystems, like fighting, injury and sorcery, will guide you in adjudicating the severity of a failure result.

Let It Ride

One of the most important aspects of ability tests in game play in Burning Wheel is the Let It Ride rule: A player shall test once against an obstacle and shall not roll again until conditions legitimately and drastically change. Neither GM nor player can call for a retest unless those conditions change. Successes from the initial roll count for all applicable situations in play.

A GM cannot call for multiple rolls of the same ability to accomplish a player's stated intent. Nor can a player retest a failed roll simply because he failed. Tests must be distilled down to as few rolls as possible. The successes of those rolls ride across the entire situation, scene or session.

If a player failed a test or generated no successes, the result stands. If he was hot and got seven successes, those stand for the duration.

Time

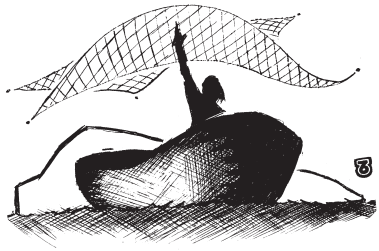
How long does a test take? Whatever the precise answer is, the time required for a test must be stated before any dice are rolled. Either the GM must inform the player of how much time is needed, or a player must state how much time his character is willing to spend.

Length of Time

Tests in Burning Wheel often mimic real world counterparts. The game is meant to evoke a living, breathing world, so there are hours, days, nights, seasons and years to account for as the characters' lives are played out. Using real world analogies for tests is a good place to start. Listed below are some guidelines for judging time.

Length of Stat Tests

Most stat tests are instantaneous affairs: catching a ball, leaping a ditch or noticing a shadow. Some stat tests are longer affairs: climbing a cliff face, escaping from bindings, moving a boulder. Generally, the latter type takes minutes to hours to accomplish. The exact interval of time is up to the GM.



Academic

Time for Academic skill tests falls into two categories—either instantaneous recall of a subject based on a successful skill test representing character knowledge, or time spent on research. Research requires days at minimum, but more often spans months and years.

Artist

Artistic skills like Painting and Sculpture require time in weeks. Sometimes they can expand into years for particularly ambitious tests.

Craftsman

Time for tests of skills like Blacksmithing, Weaver and Carpenter are measured in days and weeks. It takes a day to make a batch of horseshoes; it takes a few weeks to make a mail shirt.

Forester

Forester skill tests—Stealthy, Tracking, Hunting, Orienteering, etc.—are measured in minutes, hours and occasionally days.

Martial

Martial tests are nearly all sudden actions.

Medicinal
Medicinal skill tests—Surgery, Field Dressing, Herbalism, Bloodletting, etc.—are measured in minutes and hours. These times are described in detail in the Anatomy of Injury section.

Military
Military skills—Strategy, Tactics, Logistics, Skirmish Training and Formation Fighting Training—generally follow the same guidelines as the academic and physical tests to which they are cousins.

Musical
Musical composition takes weeks and months to perfect. Musical performance takes as long as it takes.

Peasant
Peasant skills are varied and complex—from Animal Husbandry to Farming. One thing they all hold in common is that they take a while. Farming is a seasonal affair. Animal Husbandry tests span a few hours to a few years.

However, in play, peasant skills can be used in the short term—to determine why a crop died or to calm a frightened animal. These tests usually take just a few minutes.

Physical
Physical skills like Climbing are very situational. Usually the time of the task is based on how far the character has to go. Use common sense.

Schools of Thought
Doctrine and Philosophy tests obey the same rules as academic skills.

Seafaring
Seafaring skills—Rigging, Knots, Navigation—obey the same rules as peasant skills. Some tests take days or weeks, others only a few moments.

Social
In Burning Wheel, a social skill test is made for a single interaction. This is heavily dependent on roleplaying, but these tests can require a few moments of banter or a hours of negotiations.

Sorcerous
Times for sorcerous skill tests are discussed in the Sorcery section.

Special/Miscellaneous
For skills that fall in the Special/Miscellaneous category, use the closest analog from the list above.

Breaking up a Test

If the GM feels a test is going to take an inordinate amount of time, but that bits and pieces can be accomplished separately, he can break up the results of the test. Only one roll is made, but the GM then parcels out the results across the allotted time. The character may leave and return to the test as appropriate, each time gaining the next set of results.

A young lady has found an ancient Elvish text. The GM tells the player that it will take many months to read. The player passes her Reading test and digs into the tome. Each session, the GM gives the player another clue to the content of the volume—describing facets of Elvish history and lore.

Time and Failure

A character must spend the same time failing a test as succeeding. Even when the character fails, he doesn't always know. If he missed by a lot—completely messed it up—then he can give up right away and not lose too much time.

Time and Play: Meanwhile

If a player undertakes a test that's going to occupy his character a couple of hours, other players have a few hours to kill with their characters. The GM turns to the next player and says, "Meanwhile, what are you going to do?"

Keep going around the table like this. Allow players to fill up the gaps of "downtime" with stuff like research, exploration, scouting, practice, etc. They can undertake activities that can be resolved with a roll or two and that can be narrated to have occupied the in-game time frame.

Help

Players may have their characters help one another in the game. When two or more characters are acting together, only one player rolls. His character is considered the primary character for the test. He accepts much of the risk, though he shares the reward.

Conditions of Help

In order to help, three social conditions must be met at the table. First, the acting player must willingly accept the help from his compatriots. Help cannot be forced or surreptitious; it must be open and agreed upon. The acting player is free to turn it down. Second, any player who is helping must then physically give the acting player one of his dice to roll. This is so we know if you're helpful or not!

Lastly, the helping player must participate in the scene: He describes how his character is helping the other.

How Can I Help?

Once help has been accepted, you have to determine if and how other characters can help. First Rule of Help: Skills may help skills and stats. Stats may help stats. Stats may not help skills. Circles may help Circles (if appropriate). Resources may help Resources.

Second Rule of Help: The helping ability must be related in some way—similar skills are the best candidates for help. Often this is situational, but the help must make sense to the players. The FoRK listing for skills is a good guide, but not the definitive source. The GM is the final arbiter of who can and can't help. See the next page for more on FoRKs.

Helping Dice

If the exponent of the helping ability is 4 or lower, one die is given to the acting player as help. If the exponent of the ability is 5 or higher, two dice are granted.

A soldier with Field Dressing is helping a midwife with Herbalism treat his wounded friend. They are trying to treat a severe wound to the leg (Ob 5 for Herbalism). The two players decide that the midwife is the primary for this test, and the soldier will help. The soldier has a Field Dressing skill of B4 and thus adds one die. The player hands the helping die over to the midwife's player who adds it to her Herbalism skill of B5 for this test.

Fields of Related Knowledge

A player may have his character use his varied experience to help himself. We call this using your Fields of Related Knowledge or FoRKs.

When testing a skill, each related skill the character possesses can be used like help to add an additional die (+1D) to the roll. FoRK dice are different than helping dice. If the related skill is exponent 7 or higher, add +2D.

Meg is testing her Elven Loremaster's History skill. She's looking for information about Dwarven culture, so she can add a die from her character's Dwarf-Wise skill.

Or Rich's Orc Great One is laying waste to his inferiors with his Axe skill. Rich wants to fight dirty, so he adds a die from his Brawling skill—he describes his Orc throwing elbows and knees and generally being a bastard.

FoRKs are situational. The players suggest them through roleplay, and the GM arbitrates which are applicable and which are not. Players describe how their FoRK affects their actions. GMs then incorporate the FoRKs into the results of the test.

Also, just to be clear, stats and attributes may never FoRK.

Exponent 0

If your stat, skill or attribute is currently exponent 0 you may not test this ability. You may not receive help. FoRK into it or spend artha on it. It is unavailable until you advance it, replenish it or recover.

Unskilled Tests

Beginner's Luck

If a character does not have an appropriate skill for a test, he may test using a stat instead. Every skill has a stat on which it is based. We call this its root. However, when rolling a root stat in place of a skill, double the base obstacle of the test. Ob 1 tests become Ob 2. Ob 4 tests become Ob 8. Easy stuff won't be too much of a problem, but more complex tasks will be all but impossible. When testing for Beginner's Luck, double the base obstacle and then add disadvantages to that. Don't double the disadvantages.

Tools

Some skills are listed with a requirement for tools. Tests made without the necessary tools suffer a double obstacle penalty. This can be combined with the Beginner's Luck penalty!

When using expendable tools, roll a Die of Fate each time they are used after the first. A result of 1 indicates the tools have been used up and must be replenished by the appropriate means.

Replenishing Tools

The Resources chapter lists obstacles for purchasing certain tool kits. The Scavenging skill can also be used to replenish tools, if appropriate. The Blacksmith and Black Metal Artifice skills can both be used to make various types of tools.

Written Instructions

Occasionally, a character will stumble across a set of instructions in game—an item or some information that can aid him.

All instructions must be given a complexity obstacle by the GM: Simple and clear stuff that can easily be transmitted through text and illustrations is Ob 1 or 2. More complex instructions, like those that teach a martial art or how to build a trebuchet, are Ob 3-5. Really arcane stuff only goes up from there.

The character reading the instructions must pass a Reading or Research test against the obstacle. If successful, the instructions grant a helping die to an applicable skill test (+1D). If unsuccessful, the instructions are confusing and give a +1 Ob disadvantage to the skill test they refer to.

The Written Word as Practice

Alternately, written instructions can be used as practice. Passing the Reading test and lets the player count the time spent reading as practice for the skill.

Testing Abilities in Brief

- Intent—Announce the goal of the action.
- Task—Indicate how you want your character to carry out an action. Incorporate a skill or stat into your description.
- Standard test—An ability rolled against an obstacle set by the GM. Meet the obstacle and pass the test.
- Versus test—A test where two characters are pitted against one another. Highest number of successes wins the test. Ties go to the defender.
- Graduated test—A test with no fixed obstacle; more successes means more information/results.
- Linked test—A series of tests where, if the character before you exceeded the obstacle, you get +1D. If he failed, you get +1 Ob.
- Advantage—A favorable condition present in the game that benefits a character. +1D to the test.
- Disadvantage—An unfavorable condition that raises the obstacle of a test.
- Carefully—+1D advantage, +50% to time; introduces complication.
- Patiently—Extra successes go into quality.
- Quickly—Extra successes reduce time by -10% each.

- Success—The character completes the task laid out by the player in the manner of the stated intent.
- Failure—The player fails to achieve his intent. The character either does not complete the task or completes the task but new conditions are presented by the GM.
- Time—GM sets the time of the test. If the test is successful, time can be reduced by extra successes applied to working quickly.
- Let It Ride—One test per ability stands for the situation.
- Help—Exponent 4 or lower gives +1D. Exponent 5 or higher gives +2D.
- FoRKs—+1D for related, applicable skills. Exponent 7 or higher gives +2D.
- Beginner's Luck—Use root stat in place of skill; double obstacle penalty.
- Instructions—Test Reading or Research against Instruction obstacle. Success grants +1D to appropriate test. Failure gives a +1 Ob disadvantage.

Advancing Abilities

Advancement Is Lifeblood

Advancement is the lifeblood of Burning Wheel. The advancement system gives the feeling of a living, sweating, breathing, bleeding being in the game. It allows players to shape their characters in a variety of ways. It is vital that characters in Burning Wheel grow and change as they are played.

In order for the game to run, the GM must provide the players with obstacles. Obstacles demand tests. Tests earn advancements as well as help fulfill Beliefs.

As the characters are tested, players mark the ability's experience log. Mark enough tests of varying difficulty, and the ability advances.

Routine, Difficult and Challenging

Each test falls into one of three levels of difficulty for advancement: routine, difficult and challenging. The difficulty of a test is found by comparing the number of dice rolled against the obstacle. And it's not just about a skill exponent compared with the obstacle. Advantage, helping and FoRK dice all influence advancement.

Difficulty of Test by Dice Rolled

Test for Adv.:	Routine	Difficult	Challenging
1D	Ob 1*	Ob 1*	Ob 2+
2D	Ob 1	Ob 2	Ob 3+
3D	Ob 1-2	Ob 3	Ob 4+
4D	Ob 1-2	Ob 3-4	Ob 5+
5D	Ob 1-3	Ob 4-5	Ob 6+
6D	Ob 1-4	Ob 5-6	Ob 7+
7D	Ob 1-4	Ob 5-7	Ob 8+
8D	Ob 1-5	Ob 6-8	Ob 9+
9D	Ob 1-6	Ob 7-9	Ob 10+
10D	Ob 1-7	Ob 8-10	Ob 11+
11D	Ob 1-8	Ob 9-11	Ob 12+
12D	Ob 1-9	Ob 10-12	Ob 13+
13D	Ob 1-10	Ob 11-13	Ob 14+
14D	Ob 1-11	Ob 12-14	Ob 15+
15D	Ob 1-12	Ob 13-15	Ob 16+
16D	Ob 1-13	Ob 14-16	Ob 17+
17D	Ob 1-14	Ob 15-17	Ob 18+
18D	Ob 1-15	Ob 16-18	Ob 19+

Total Number of Dice Rolled

Obstacle of Test

*For an Ob 1 test on one die, the player may choose whether the test is routine or difficult.

An obstacle 2 test counts as routine for exponent 4 abilities, but it's difficult for an exponent 2 ability. Obstacle 3 tests are routine for exponent 5 abilities, but they're difficult for exponent 4 and challenging for exponent 2.

Number of Dice Rolled vs Obstacle

It is important to always use the number of dice rolled for a test, not just the ability exponent. Extra dice that make a test easier for the character also mean that he learns less when using such crutches.

"Wait a minute," you're saying, "I can't roll five successes on four dice! My character is automatically going to fail that test." To this I say: "You're correct, but read on, read on. The Artha chapter will show you some tricks."

Number of Tests Required for Advancement

To advance an ability exponent one rank, a player must accumulate a certain number of routine, difficult and challenging tests.

Advancing Skills

Exponent 1-4

Advancing an exponent 1-4 skill requires a number of routine tests equal to the exponent. Also, for exponent 1-4, a character needs difficult tests equal to half the exponent, or challenging tests equal to his exponent divided by three (rounded up).

Exponent 5+

For skill exponents 5 and higher, a character needs difficult tests equal to half of the skill exponent and challenging tests equal to one third of the exponent rounded up. Routine tests are not used to advance a skill exponent of 5 or higher.

Tests Required to Advance Skills

Type of test: Skill Exponent	Routine		Difficult		Challenging
1	1	and	(1	or	1)
2	2	and	(1	or	1)
3	3	and	(2	or	1)
4	4	and	(2	or	1)
5	—		3	and	1
6	—		3	and	2
7	—		4	and	2
8	—		4	and	3
9	—		5	and	3

number of tests required

In order to advance Carpentry B3, I'd need three routine tests (Ob 1-2) plus either two difficult tests (Ob 3) or one challenging test (Ob 4). To advance a B6 Sword skill, I'd need three tests at Ob 5 or 6 to meet my difficult test

requirements, and two tests at Ob 7 to get my challenging tests. This is not easily done! Tests of that difficulty don't come along very often, and when they do, they are usually life and death.

Advancing Stats

Routine tests don't count for the advancement of stats. Players must get high obstacle tests in order to advance them. Difficult and challenging tests are required, even at low exponents.

Tests Required to Advance Stats

Type of test: Stat Exponent	Routine	Difficult		Challenging
1	—	1	and	1
2	—	1	and	1
3	—	2	and	1
4	—	2	and	1
5	—	3	and	1
6	—	3	and	2
7	—	4	and	2
8	—	4	and	3
9	—	5	and	3

number of tests required

Pass or Fail

With few exceptions, tests for advancement are earned whether the character was successful or not. Pass or fail, a test is earned.

The Exceptions: Perception, Resources and Faith

Perception, Resources and Faith tests must be successful to count toward advancement.

Advancing Attributes

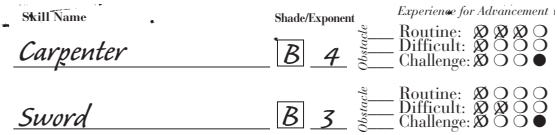
Reflexes and mortal wound advance as their parent stats increase the applicable average. Health and Steel advance as skills and are not dependent on their parent stats after character burning. Faith, Grief, Greed and Hate all advance as skills—requiring routine tests to advance exponents 1-4. Greed has a special rule: Routine tests always count, even for Greed exponents 5-10. And filling up any two of the three test categories advances Greed.

Advancing Circles and Resources

Circles advances like a skill. When advancing your base Circles ability, be sure to tally all the affiliation and reputation dice rolled to determine the actual level of the test. Resources advances like a skill as well, but only successful tests count.

Experience Log

Listed with each ability on the character sheet is an experience log. Use this to note the tests earned for advancement for individual abilities.



Handing Out Tests

Both the GM and players are responsible for remembering tests. However, sometimes things get hectic during the game. It's often best to take five minutes to review the session after it's over and make sure that players noted their tests.

Applicable Situations

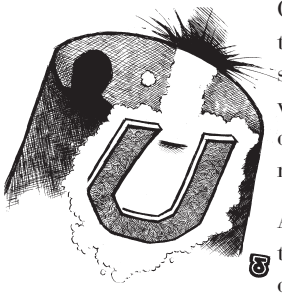
Tests are only awarded to players when their characters act in appropriate and applicable in-game situations. Everything else counts as practice.

Soliciting Tests (Test Mongering)

Tests are very important to the game, but badgering the GM for them is very bad form. Can I test? Can I? Sometimes, a player will wish to have his character roll dice for something at an inappropriate juncture in play. It is the GM's role to pace events and keep play flowing evenly. Therefore, he can have a player hold off on making a test until the appropriate time or have him stay his hand entirely.

Test mongering also involves pestering the GM for a particular test. "I need a routine. Can I make a routine test?" "Dude, it's a *dragon*. I don't think there are going to be any routine tests." The GM's job here is to say flat out: "No." Let the difficulty of the tests arise organically, not at the player's request so his character can advance. It makes for a much more interesting game.

Series of Rolls = One Test



Occasionally in game, we have situations where players are testing the same ability over and over again—martial and social conflict being the prime examples. In any instance where an ability is tested multiple times to determine the outcome, only one test is earned toward advancement. Do not note a test for every punch thrown.

A player generally takes the highest obstacle test from the encounter. However, if the character is in need of a particular test to advance the ability, a test for advancement should be noted as soon as the appropriate obstacle comes up. This is only done for series tests during which the character would advance (i.e., one test away from going up).

I Just Learned Something!

When the requirement is met, the exponent immediately advances. It doesn't matter if it's in the middle of a sword fight or while researching a new spell. Once the test is earned, the ability increases one rank. There's nothing more pleasing to my ears than a player crowing, "I just learned something!"

Wipe the Slate Clean

After the ability has advanced, all extra tests are discarded. You start over with a clean slate.

Converting or Substituting Tests

What if my character is one routine test from advancing his skill, but has tons of difficult tests? I can just convert a test, right? *No*. Hard and fast rule: Players cannot convert or substitute tests, ever.

Advancement for Graduated Tests

When logging graduated tests for advancement, the obstacle is always 1. These tests always count as routine.

Advancement for Versus Tests

For versus tests, use the number of successes your opponent generated plus any obstacle penalties as the obstacle for the test when consulting the Dice vs Obstacle table at the beginning of this chapter.

Helping and Advancement

Helping dice add to the dice total for the acting character, making it harder to earn difficult or challenging tests for advancement.

For example, my character's got to patch up this hole in the cistern before all the water drains out. The GM sets the obstacle at 2. I want to get this done as quickly as possible and ensure success, so I ask one of the other players, "Can you help?" His character has Engineering B2. The GM agrees that this is an applicable skill. The player passes me a die and I add it to my skill.

Without his help, the test would have counted as a difficult for advancement—3D vs Ob 2. With his help, the test counts as a routine—4D vs Ob 2.

Helpers Learn

Though he doesn't roll any dice, a character who helps earns a test for advancement—for stats, skills or attributes. The level of the test is the same as if he had tested against the obstacle with his own ability.

If your skill is B2 and you help with an Ob 5 test, you earn a challenging test for advancement regardless of how many dice the player you're helping rolls.

If helping with a stat on an unskilled test, the player does not earn a test toward his aptitude for learning the skill. Since he is helping with his stat, he earns a test for advancing his stat if the obstacle is appropriate.

FoRKs and Advancement

Like helping dice, FoRKs can reduce the difficulty of a test for purposes of advancement. FoRKs count toward total dice when consulting the Dice Rolled vs Obstacle table. Relying on FoRKs all the time can stymie character growth. And the abilities that are FoRKed into another do not earn tests toward advancement. Only the primary ability earns the test.

Advantage Dice and Advancement

Advantages and bonus dice count toward the dice total when determining the difficulty of tests for advancement.

I have a B4 Crossbow skill. This means that Ob 3 tests are normally difficult for me. My superior quality crossbow gives me +1D to my skill tests. The addition of the bonus die increases my die pool to B5. When rolling five dice an Ob 3 is routine, not difficult.

Artha and Advancement

Dice from artha never count toward the total dice rolled for purposes of advancement.

If you have a skill of B4 and add three dice from artha, the test still counts as if you rolled four dice.

Social Skills and Advancement

Sometimes we get so wrapped up in our performances we neglect the dice. Well, this heading is here to remind you to roll the dice. After an impassioned speech, set an obstacle and test a skill. Then note the test for advancement! Roleplaying performance is part of this game but not independent of the die mechanics.

Practice

In Burning Wheel, characters can undertake a practice regimen to polish their skills. This aids characters in advancing their skills. Practice helps fill in the gaps in a character's active experience. The drawback to practice is that it requires substantial in-game time investment.

Practice Times

hours per day to earn a test…

Skill Category	Cycle	Routine	Difficult	Challenging
Academic	6 months	2 hours	4 hours	8 hours
Artisan	1 year	4 hours	8 hours	12 hours
Artist	6 months	3 hours	6 hours	12 hours
Craftsman	1 year	3 hours	8 hours	12 hours
Forester	6 months	3 hours	6 hours	12 hours
Martial	1 month	2 hours	4 hours	8 hours
Medicinal	1 year	4 hours	8 hours	12 hours
Military	6 months	2 hours	4 hours	8 hours
Musical	1 month	2 hours	4 hours	8 hours
Peasant	3 months	1 hour	4 hours	12 hours
Physical	1 month	2 hours	4 hours	8 hours
School of Thought	6 months	3 hours	6 hours	12 hours
Seafaring	3 months	2 hours	4 hours	8 hours
Social	1 month	2 hours	4 hours	8 hours
Sorcerous	1 year	5 hours	10 hours	15 hours
Special/Misc.	3 months	3 hours	6 hours	12 hours

Practice time comes in many forms: exercising, studying and even trying out your skills on your friends. These tables list the practice cycles for the different categories. The *Cycle* is the length of time that a character needs to practice in order to earn one test. *Hours* indicates the actual time per day that the character must spend practicing during the cycle.

Stat/Attribute	Cycle	Routine	Difficult	Challenging
Will	1 year	4 hours	8 hours	16 hours
Perception	6 months	3 hours	6 hours	12 hours
Agility	3 months	2 hours	4 hours	8 hours
Speed	3 months	3 hours	6 hours	9 hours
Power	1 month	2 hours	4 hours	8 hours
Forte	2 months	4 hours	8 hours	16 hours
Faith	1 year	5 hours	10 hours	20 hours
Steel	2 months	1 hour	3 hours	9 hours

If a character maintains the daily time requirement for one practice cycle, he earns the listed test for that skill for the purposes of advancement. You cannot practice the same skill more than once per cycle.

For example, if my character practices his Carpentry (a Craftsman skill) for 3 hours every day for a year, he earns a routine test for advancement at the end of a year. Being a craftsman is hard!

Rich has his knight character work out every morning and practice doing hand drills to test his Agility. He'll need four hours a day for three months of game time in order to earn a difficult test for advancement.

Maximum Practice

A character may only be forced to practice for a number of hours equal to three times (3x) his Will exponent per day. The most a character can practice in a day, no matter the Will exponent, is 20 hours in a day. But sleep deprivation is an excellent source for Forte tests to resist fatigue and stress.

Using Practice in the Game

Sometimes a player will indicate that his character is undertaking some long task like wandering the countryside, working on the farm or meditating in the hills. These periods count as practice for applicable skills and abilities.

Any time a player indicates some action for his character that is cool but otherwise has no direct effect on driving the game forward, the in-game time should be logged toward practice for the applicable abilities.

Practice can also help bridge time for a character when a player has been absent from the table and wishes to reintroduce his character. "Okay, you've been gone for about a year of game time. Why don't you spread a year's practice among your skills? Nothing can advance more than one." Alternately, a character might only get a week or two to practice—not enough time to earn a test. Log the segments of time practiced. Once they equal a full cycle, take a test toward advancement.

Learning New Skills

Root Stats

Every skill has a stat or combination of stats on which it is based. This is called its root. Skills are listed with their roots in the Character Burner.

The root for Sword is Agility.

Beginner's Luck

As mentioned in the Testing Your Abilities section, when a character doesn't have an appropriate skill, he may test against his Beginner's Luck at a double obstacle penalty. Beginner's Luck dice are equal to the root stat of the skill (not half the stat, the full dice). For skills with two roots, choose which stat to take the test on.

Take note that the first test toward learning a skill listed as sorcerous type must come from Instruction rather than practice or beginner's luck. Once you've earned that test you can use beginner's luck and practice.

Aptitude

Aptitude in Burning Wheel indicates the number of tests a character needs in order to gain a new skill. Aptitude is equal to 10 minus the *root stat*. If the root is a combination of two or more stats, the aptitude is 10 minus the average of the root stats rounded down.

A character with a B4 Agility has a 6 Aptitude for learning the Sword skill (10 minus his exponent 4 Agility).

Beginner's Luck for Learning

When using Beginner's Luck, it is possible to learn new skills. However, the obstacles for advancement are factored slightly differently. When

testing the root stat, note the obstacle before doubling. If the obstacle would count as routine (and thus not actually count) for advancing the stat, you note a test for learning the skill. If the Beginner's Luck test, before doubling, would count as difficult or challenging for the stat, note a test for advancing the root stat. If there are disadvantages to be applied to the test, add them to the base obstacle for determining the test for advancement, but don't double them. Add them to the final obstacle after doubling, when making the test.

I have a B4 Agility. I am shooting unskilled at an Orc with a hunting bow. It's an Ob 2 test doubled to 4 due the Beginner's Luck rules. An Ob 2 test counts as a routine test toward Agility, so the test is logged toward learning the Bow skill. If the test had been Ob 3, that'd be a difficult test for Agility. I'd take that toward advancing the stat. If the Orc was carrying a shield, that would add +1 Ob to my test. So the obstacle for advancement would be 3—difficult—but the obstacle to hit him would be 5 (2 doubled +1).

Opening the Skill

Once you meet the Aptitude requirement, your character opens the skill. Write it in the skills section of your character sheet. The starting exponent for all skills is half of the root, or the average of two roots, rounded down.

With a B4 Agility, I open a Sword skill after six Beginner's Luck tests. The skill opens at half of the root stat. That's a B2 Sword for my character.

Once the skill opens, it advances normally like any other skill.

Shade and New Skills

A new skill opens with the same shade as its root stat. If the root has two shades, the skill opens at the darker shade, but you add two to the total before factoring the root. The Monster Burner chapter, Gray and White Math (pages 367–368), is the definitive source for all things shaded. See also the Heroic and Supernatural chapter in this book.

Learning from Another

Characters may learn from each other in game. To teach, the character must have the skill to be taught. The exponent of the skill must be equal to or higher than the student's.

Instruction Obstacles

To begin the process, the instructor must pass an Instruction skill test. The obstacle for the Instruction test depends on the level of the test the Instructor wishes to give to the student: 1 for a routine test, 2 for a difficult test and 3 for a challenging test. Add a penalty for the type of

skill: +2 Ob Medicinal and Military, +3 Ob for Sorcerous and Special, +1 Ob for Artist and School of Thought. Other skill types do not carry a penalty.

If the test is failed, then time spent with the instructor merely counts as practice. Furthermore, either the student is at +1 Ob to his next test in that area or the Instructor suffers a +1 Ob penalty to further instruct this student. GM's call.

Test Me

Instructors can give their students tests for advancement or tests for learning a new skill. The obstacle of the test to be given to the student can't be higher than the Instructor's skill in the area.

If you have Sword B4, you can only teach up to Ob 4 tests. That means that you can't give challenging tests to anyone with a skill exponent of 4 or higher. Nor can you give difficult tests to a character with a skill of 6 or higher.

Students don't roll in this process. They accept instruction and either note the test for advancement or note the practice time.

Instruction Time

The time for each Instruction test is days equal to 10 minus the instructor's Will, plus 10 minus the student's Will, plus the obstacle of the test on offer. The instructor can offer his student obstacles for a test equal to or less than his skill level.

An instructor with a Will B5 (5 days) can teach a student with a Will of B4 (6 days) one test in 11 days plus days equal to the obstacle of the test. If he was schooling his student's B4 Sword skill and wanted to give him a difficult test (Ob 3), the total time would be 11 days plus the 3 from the obstacle: 14 days altogether.

After the required time, the student earns a test for advancement.

All Day, Every Day

Instruction eats up all of the character's free time. He may not practice other skills during that time.

Learning Training Skills

A character may learn Training skills, such as Armor Training or Formation Fighting, in the course of his life. Aptitude requirements are the same as for normal skills, but tests can only be earned via practice or instruction. You can't use Beginner's Luck to learn a training skill.

Advancement in Brief

- The number of dice rolled compared to the obstacle of the test determines the difficulty of the test for advancement. Consult the table for details.
- Exponent 1-4 skills must be advanced by filling up the routine test requirement. Then, meeting either the difficult or challenging test requirement will push the skill to the next exponent level.
- Exponent 5+ skills only advance via difficult and challenging tests. Routine tests no longer count for advancement.
- Stats only advance via difficult and challenging tests, regardless of their exponent.
- Attributes— Steel and Health advance as skills.
- Experience Log— Note the level of the test on your experience log.
- A series of rolls in a single scene or conflict equals one test for advancement.
- Graduated tests— A test with no fixed obstacle counts as a routine test.
- Versus tests use your opponent's number of successes as the obstacle.
- Help and Advancement— Helping dice count toward the total number of dice rolled for a test, thereby making the test easier to pass, and less significant for advancement.
- FoRKs and Advancement— FoRKs count toward the total dice rolled. They make the test easier and usually lower the difficulty.
- Advantage and Advancement— Advantages count toward the total dice rolled and potentially reduce the difficulty of the test.
- Social Skills and Advancement— Be sure to set obstacles and roll dice after a good performance.
- Practice— Daily time devoted to a skill nets a test after a number of months or a year. Any character actions that don't count as a test count as practice.
- Learning new skills— To learn a new skill, a player must make a number of tests equal to his aptitude for the skill. Aptitudes are 10 minus the root stat of the skill. Once the required tests are earned, the new skill is opened at half the root stat (rounded down).

Beliefs, Instincts and Traits

In the introduction to the game, I mentioned that each player is obliged to set out a series of priorities for his character: priorities that describe the player's goals for his character and how he means to achieve them.

There are three sets of player-chosen priorities: Beliefs, Instincts and traits. Each has a different effect on how you play your character and how you're rewarded.

Beliefs

When a player brings to life a new character in Burning Wheel, he furnishes that character with three Beliefs. In essence, these are the top three priorities for the character in play.

These are not general beliefs, like "God" or "Country." They are explicitly stated drives that tie directly into the world and setting. Examples of Beliefs are "I must serve the Etharch so that I might be redeemed for my crime," or "I will protect my friend's sister at any cost."

When sculpting your character's Beliefs, think: What do I want out of this character and this situation? How can my character's Beliefs reflect that? Then shape your character's Beliefs to reflect those priorities.

Creating Beliefs for your character is discussed in detail in the Character Burner.

Anchored Beliefs

Beliefs are not arbitrarily chosen. You relate each one to what is going on in the game. They bind your character into the world. As they are challenged, they give you the chance to express what your character is about.

Beliefs in Play

By openly and honestly setting down your priorities, you help the GM and the other players get the most out of the game. Now that they all know what you're after, they can help you get it.

Stating a Belief for a peasant, "I'm the true king of this land," does not make it factual in game. But by getting that out in the open, you are letting other players know you want situations revolving around that theme—a mad peasant rebel rising to challenge the established order. Other players are in on both the irony and drama, and they can help you get the most of them. You might not succeed, but playing out that struggle is what the game is all about. Of course, this doesn't mean the characters are aware of each other's Beliefs. We're talking about a strict separation of player and character here.

Beliefs are meant to be challenged, betrayed and broken. Such emotional drama makes for a good game. If your character has a Belief, "I guard the prince's life with my own," and the prince is slain before your eyes in the climax of the scenario, that's your chance to play out a tortured and dramatic scene and really go ballistic.

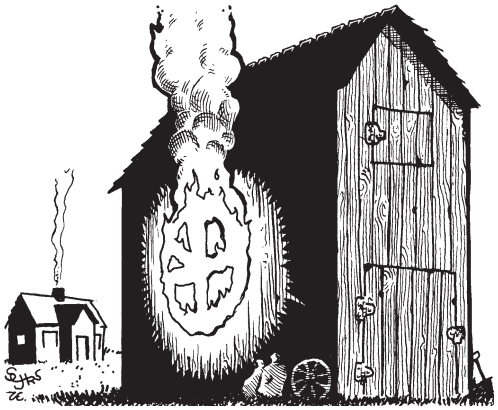
Conversely, if the prince is killed right out of the gate, the character is drained of purpose. Note that the player stated he wanted to defend the prince in play, not avenge him. Killing the prince in the first session sucks the life out of the character. He really has no reason to participate any longer. But if the prince dies in the grand climax, c'est la vie. The protector must then roll with the punches and react to this new change. Even better, if the prince dies due to the actions or failures of his own guardian—now that's good stuff.

Another example: We once had a character with the Belief: "I will one day restore my wife's life." His wife had died, and he kept her body around, trying to figure out a way to bring her back. Well, mid-way through the game, the GM magically restored his wife to the land of the living. I've never seen a more crushed player. He didn't know what do! He had stated that the quest and the struggle was the goal, not the end result. "One day!" he said. But the GM insisted, and the whole scenario and character were ruined for the player.

Lastly, there is more to Beliefs than just melodrama. In fact, they are used most with the artha mechanics. Players manipulate their character's Beliefs and the situations of game play in order to earn artha. Artha is discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Changing Beliefs

A player may change his character's Beliefs as he sees fit. Characters are meant to grow and change through play. Changing Beliefs is a vital part



of that growth. However, the GM has final say over when a Belief may be changed. If he feels the player is changing a Belief to wriggle out of a difficult situation and not as part of character growth, then he may delay the change until a time that he sees as appropriate.

Danny's Strider has the Belief, "One man can make a difference." At the end of the adventure, Danny realizes his character spent all of his time helping his friends and holding the group together. He announces that his character's outlook has changed and so has his Belief. He changes it to, "Only together shall we be victorious over our enemies."

Another example: Pete's and Chris's characters have an argument in the game. Pete's smuggler character is ensorcelled by an enchanted bell. He asks Chris's wizard to destroy the device. Chris refuses, intimating that the bell could be useful in the future for controlling the smuggler! Pete's character has the Belief, "The sorcerers who ruined my life must pay—with their lives!" He is so livid after this argument, he turns to the GM: "I'm changing my Belief; I'm expanding it. 'All sorcerers are evil, foul creatures. They must be purged from the earth.'" That includes Chris's wizard. Sweet!

Instincts

Instincts are also player priorities for a character, but they have a different mechanical application than Beliefs. Rather than reflect who or what the character is, Instincts help define how the character acts.

What's been drilled into the character's head? What life lessons has he been forced to learn? What has he taught himself in order to survive? These are Instincts in Burning Wheel. Players choose three for their characters.

Always, Never, When or If/Then

The best Instincts are defined as clear statements—either "Always do X," or "Never do Y," or as "If this condition arises, then take this action."

What an Instinct does is set a condition and a reaction to that condition for the character. And this reaction/behavior of the character is sacrosanct: So long as the conditions are met, the action is done. The player doesn't even have to announce it. It either happens behind the scenes or instantly, without hesitation.

A common Instinct is something like "When on patrol, always have my bow ready and an arrow nocked." Even if the player never states this, so long as it's written on the character sheet, it is fact.

Instincts allow players to set conditions for their characters that might otherwise break the rules. Do you have a "draw sword" Instinct? Well then, your character's sword is drawn at the start of combat without having to spend actions. Instincts cannot allow you to bypass a test, but they can ensure you made the test at some time before trouble started.

Insurance

Instincts can also be described as player character insurance vs GM onslaught. They are a mechanical way to ensure that your character behaves in a certain manner which can't be contravened by the GM.

But instincts don't need to be adversarial. In fact, they work better when the player and GM cooperate, using the Instincts to drive the character in play.

Like Beliefs, Instincts can be used to earn artha. See the next chapter, The Artha Wheel, for more on that.

Changing Instincts

A player may change his character's Instincts as he sees fit—as the character's experience in play changes him.

Rich's insurrectionist watched his friend's mind get warped and twisted by a foul wizard until he was nothing more than a drooling thrall. As soon as the scene ended, Rich turned to the GM: "I'm changing one of my Instincts. I'm losing 'Always scrounge for weapons after a battle,' and changing it to 'If I am ensorcelled by a wizard, I plunge my sword into my throat and kill myself.'" Quite a brutal Instinct, but it was something he felt very passionately about.

However, the GM has final say over when an Instinct may be changed. If he feels the player is changing an Instinct to be a munchkin and power gamer and not as part of character growth, then he may delay the change until a time that he sees as appropriate.

Traits

Beliefs and Instincts are personality and behavior priorities for characters. Traits are also a kind of priority. By choosing traits, a player is stating to the world, "This is what's most important to me about my character; these are his most prominent aspects."

There are three kinds of traits, *character* (including cosmetic traits), *call-on* and *die* traits. Each type affects the game in a different way.

Character Traits

A character trait illustrates a prominent aspect of a character's psychological or physiological make-up—something that affects how the character will be roleplayed at the table, something that says, "You're not just someone, you're *it*." Anyone can say his character is hairy, but unless he pays the trait point, it's hairy with a lower-case "h." Pay the point, and he's the hairiest guy around.

These are guide posts that help the player navigate play with the character. By choosing these traits, the player is stating that he is going to do one of two things: Either he's going to play those traits to the hilt—he's going to exemplify them—or he's saying that his character is starting with these traits, but he's about to change. In the second case, character traits are used as the crux for creating all sorts of problems for his character in game. He's going to use his traits to get his character into situations where he has to make hard decisions. Do I go with my nature, or do I fight against it? This is fuel for some very fine play, and the system supports this behavior.

Flighty, Determined and Brutal are examples of character traits.

Character traits also serve another important role: They add necessary color to the game. They help capture our imaginations and immerse us in the story.

Cosmetic Traits

Cosmetic traits are character traits that describe how a character looks. Not every character needs to have cosmetic traits to describe his appearance. Without them, we assume the character is normal-looking within typical variations. A cosmetic trait is used to describe something on the character that really stands out.

Call-On Traits

This type of trait is powerful and subtle. When its conditions are met, traditional game mechanics are set aside either to break a tie (in the call-on-trait-having character's favor) or to allow the player to reroll failed dice on one test.

Revered is a call-on for Oratory. When delivering speeches to the faithful or gullible, the player may call on this trait to reroll failed dice once per session.

Players decide when and how they'll "call on" this type of trait (hence the name). Call-ons may only be invoked once per session. They are a powerful aid, representing an unpredictable edge the character possesses.

Die Traits

Die traits modify an ability in the same way every time they are used. Either they add a die or two, change a game mechanical number—an obstacle, or hesitation—or grant a new ability/new way to roll dice.

Mechanical Reward

Traits are more mechanical in nature than Beliefs and Instincts, but they too can be used to leverage artha. And, as you know, that's all discussed in the next section, The Artha Wheel.

Changing Traits and Earning New Ones

It is important that characters grow and change through play. In Burning Wheel, the outward perception of how the character was played is just as important as the player's inward perception of what he thinks the character is all about.

Trait Vote

The way the character is played changes him. This can be a deliberate effort on the part of the player—to change his character via his roleplaying—or an unintended side effect.

At the end of a campaign or extended adventure, the GM and the players nominate characters to receive new traits. Going around the table, players discuss each character who participated in the adventure. Possible traits are suggested for all the characters. After all characters have been discussed, the players vote on the traits suggested for each character. The owning player doesn't vote for his own traits. A unanimous decision grants the trait. Character, call-on and die traits can be awarded.

For short adventures and scenarios, I recommend that characters be allowed only one new trait from the vote. For longer, epic stories, two or three traits is a fair limit.

Characters can be awarded traits that change their bodies—scars, a limp or even missing digits—to reflect their in-game experiences. They can (and should) be awarded character traits according to how the other players perceive their personalities in the course of play. This shouldn't be a punishment, but an honest outward reflection of what's been happening at the table.

You can invest in earning certain traits by spending artha to accomplish your Beliefs and Instincts. Artha is discussed in the next chapter, The Artha Wheel.

Voted Off the Island

In addition to voting for new traits for a character, the GM or owning player may propose that a character lose a trait. If the GM proposes the loss of a trait, a unanimous result is required for the trait to be voted off. If the owning player suggested it, a simple majority will do.

Evolving Beliefs and Instincts

Beliefs and Instincts are meant to evolve into traits throughout the course of play. Spending artha—which is discussed in the next chapter—on a Belief or Instinct is a good benchmark for the type or power level of a trait. The more artha spent, the more potent the trait.

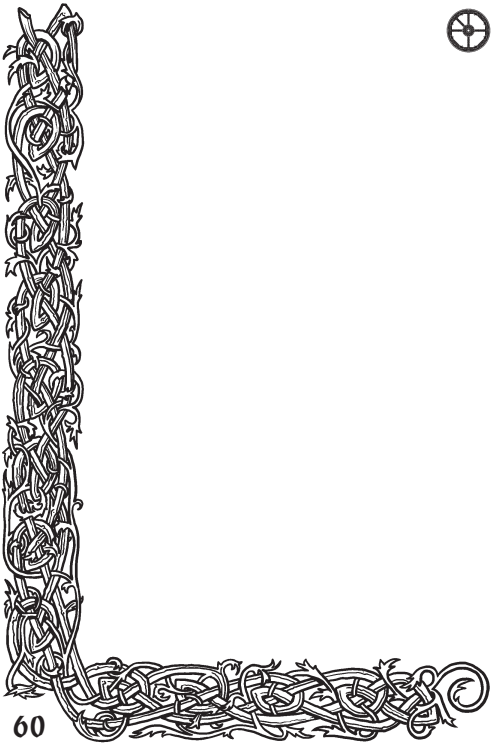
Rate of Change

The group can change the rate of development for their characters by increasing the frequency of trait votes. The default setting is to vote after 6-12 sessions. Voting after every goal is accomplished, rather than after

a series of goals, causes the characters to grow quickly and potentially become more powerful. If the group wishes to play like this, it should be discussed and announced before characters are burned so everyone can tailor their play style to this mode.

Beliefs, Instincts and Traits in Brief

- Belief— A short statement of ethical or moral priority the player assigns to the character.
- Instinct— An *if/then*, *always*, *never* or *when* statement that the player assigns to his character to dictate a reaction or course of action.
- Character trait— A guidepost for roleplaying that announces to the group, "This is what is important to me about my character."
- Call-on trait— Breaks ties or allows for a reroll on a failed test once per session.
- Die trait— Adds dice, adds/reduces penalties or allows access to additional abilities the character would not otherwise have.
- Trait Vote— At the end of an adventure, players vote on the other characters traits based on how they were played.



The Artha Wheel

You've heard so much about it, and here it is: *artha.* If the mechanics are the fuel, then players are the fire, and artha is the spin on the wheel and the coruscation of the flames. It's an interface between GM, player and system. GMs reward players for driving the story forward, and players reward themselves by using their characters to further complicate the story at hand.

Spiritual Rewards in a World on Fire

Burning Wheel uses a point-based reward system. Most often, the points are awarded for creating interesting situations by playing out, on and off a character's Beliefs and Instincts.

Artha

The points awarded are called artha. It's a Sanskrit word that means something equivalent to a person's power and success in his community or immediate surroundings. It is the middle ground between obsession with self, enlightenment and transcendence. In the game, it helps the character overcome obstacles and eventually hone abilities to mythical levels of excellence. There are three types of artha—fate, persona and deeds—each with their own effect on the game.

Interface

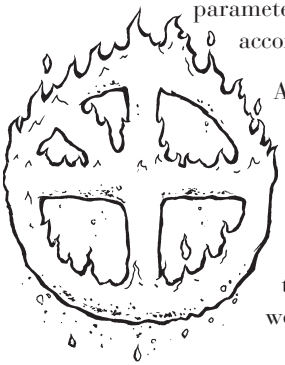
While it's cool to be rewarded for doing something neat, there is another, more important aspect to the process. The flow of artha creates a connection between player, character and GM based on themes and issues important to their game.

Beliefs, Instincts and traits (BITs) are the primary conduit between the player, his character and the artha system. Setting out BITs for his character, a player states to the GM and the group what his goals in play are for this character. He lets everyone know how and when he wants to be rewarded for playing his character.

For example, a player creates a rebellious peasant character with a Belief that "Class is meaningless." When this character encounters his "noble betters," everyone can expect trouble; he's going to create it! And because it's one of his Beliefs, he'll be rewarded for creating interesting, meaningful and difficult situations in this vein.

GM's Role

The GM has a heavy role in the artha game. He's got to create situations to challenge the players' Beliefs. He also is allowed to create his own parameters for the story. Players that work with the GM and accomplish great deeds earn even greater rewards.



At first, the arrangement may seem a little too carrot and stick. But it is more subtle than that. Players state their goals and how they want to be rewarded. They can earn these awards without ever moving for the carrot. But the GM also has the power to provide greater rewards for epic deeds. All in all, we've found this interface—this revolving wheel, if you will—to work very well.

Fate, Persona and Deeds

As mentioned above, there are three types of artha: fate, persona and deeds. Fate is earned simply by walking the character's destined path. It can be spent on minor boosts and aids. Persona is earned by idiomatic roleplaying, breaking out of the mold of the aforementioned destiny and by accomplishing personal goals. It can be spent to modify die rolls. Lastly, deeds artha marks a character's accomplishments beyond his immediate and personal goals—going beyond what is desired to what is needed. Deeds points are the hardest to earn and can be spent to heavily modify die rolls.

Onward and Upward

As the player spends artha to improve his character's chance of survival, he moves toward an epiphany. Every time a player tests one of his character's skills or stats and spends artha on the test, that ability gets one step closer to the next shade. When the requisite number of artha-enhanced tests is completed, the ability automatically and immediately shade-shifts one step lighter. See the Epiphany section toward the end of this chapter.

Earning Artha

Artha is awarded at the end of the session by consensus according to the criteria described in this section.

Players may nominate one another for artha awards—specifically fate and persona points, not deeds. Also, players may nominate the GM's NPCs for artha awards as they see fit. The GM is obligated to accept.

Fate artha is rather common—a few points are earned every session. Persona points are gained as personal goals are accomplished, so their frequency of award is entirely up to the game play—but usually only one per session. Deeds are awarded at the end of a long series of personal goals that result in the character accomplishing "the really big thing."

Fate

Beliefs

Fate points are earned for manifesting the character's Beliefs in a convincing and entertaining manner. Entertaining doesn't only mean funny—we all enjoy a good dramatic performance now and again. This award is given when playing a Belief serves a purpose and drives the game forward. It is a very open condition, so there's a lot of room to get a character's Beliefs involved.

Andy's crime lord, Omi-yori, has the Belief, "It is always better to smooth wrinkles than ruffle feathers." At the table, Pete and Ian are having a row between their characters. Andy interposes his character and, making conciliatory gestures to both parties, diffuses the situation. Andy will earn a fate point for that Belief at the end of the session.

Instincts

Fate points are earned for playing Instincts when such play gets the character in trouble or creates a difficult or awkward situation.

A character with the Instinct "Draw my sword at the first sign of trouble" is at court pleading his case. Suddenly, in walks his nemesis! The player doesn't have to draw his sword. He can resist the Instinct because it's going to cause trouble. But if he plays it out, he gets a fate point.

If the GM and other players feel a player is being disruptive with his Instincts, then artha does not have to be awarded. However, if you're playing your game for humor, by all means grant the reward.

Traits

Fate artha can be earned for using traits, but only if invoking that trait alters the direction of the story in an unforeseen way or makes life difficult for the character.

If a player's character has the Clumsy trait and he opts to fumble the MacGuffin at the absolutely "wrong" time, that's worth a fate point.

Humor

A fate point is earned if a player can stop the table dead with humor while in character. Dramatic play gets even greater rewards. See Embodiment and Moldbreaker below.

Right Skill, Right Time

Lastly, if a character has the right skill (when no one else does) to keep the story moving, he should be rewarded with a fate point. Consider it a reward for clever character burning. Keep this award rare.

Persona

Embodiment

When a player captures the mood of the table perfectly and further drives the story onward, one persona point is awarded. Moments like great speeches, desperate decisions or gruesome revenge fall into this category. This is a tough award to get, as a player really must go above and beyond in his roleplaying.

Moldbreaker

If a player comes to a point in the story where his Beliefs, Instincts and traits conflict with a decision he must make—a direction in which he must go—and he plays out the inner turmoil, the conflict within his own guts, in a believable and engaging manner, then he earns a persona point.

Other players, as well as the GM, may nominate each other for this award. A majority vote at the table awards the point. To earn the reward, the player must really push his character.

Personal Goals

Characters who accomplish personal goals—revenge, promotion, seduction, victory, etc—earn a persona point. These goals should either be clearly described in a character's Beliefs, or should be an explicitly stated goal for the group. This is the award for accomplishing all the various parts of an adventure—the assassinations, the betrayals, the kidnappings, recovery of lost artifacts, learning of ancient secrets, etc.

Workhorse

Being the workhorse character—the most relied upon in a given scenario—is worth a persona point. This is for the mundane stuff—having that piece of gear to make a scene go, having that skill to get the other character safely through danger and just generally slaving away behind the scenes to make it all work.

MVP

Being voted the "most valuable player" for a scenario earns a persona point. MVP is for the character who drives the story to its conclusion, the character who shines in the last moments and about whom everyone agrees, "Damn, we couldn't have done it without him!"

Voting for Workhorse and MVP

These awards are generally given at the end of a scenario, adventure or campaign, and they are not granted by the GM. Once a scenario is concluded, all participating players vote for whom the Workhorse of the scenario was and whom the MVP was. The GM gets one vote like all the other players.

Deeds

Deeds artha points are rare and are reserved solely for accomplishing goals larger than a character's personal agenda. To qualify for this reward you must do something that benefits more than just the character, and do it for reasons other than personal gain. Such an accomplishment must come with some cost or sacrifice—it's got to hurt a little to attain this level. Exacting revenge on your enemies through a brilliant plan is great, but it's only worth a persona point. Hitching yourself to a cause that transforms the setting—but doesn't directly benefit you or your friends—is worth a deeds point. Also, helping another character accomplish goals that are anathema to your goals, Instincts and Beliefs can earn a deeds point.

My players all had personal reasons to infiltrate a particular city, foment a rebellion and overthrow the government. Accomplishing that task, however grand, is worth a persona point. But in the end, they not only overthrew the slaver-tyrants ruling the city, but they handed control back to the rightful government when they could have taken power themselves. That's worth a deeds point.

Spending Artha

When spent at appropriate junctures in game, artha modifies the outcome of dice rolls, and thereby allows characters to perform heroic acts they would otherwise not be able to perform.

Artha must always be spent on a roll. It cannot just be dumped into a skill or stat. Something dramatic has to be happening. The dice have to roll, then the artha can flow.

Warning: Some of the artha expenditures explained below contain mechanics yet to be discussed. Skim them for now and come back to them later after you've read through the Rim of the Wheel section.

Fate

Luck— A player may spend a fate point to make the dice of a single roll open-ended (6s rerolled as new dice for additional successes). If the roll is already open-ended—Perception, Steel, Faith, Sorcery—then the player may reroll a single traitor (which is not open-ended). Luck is purchased after the dice have been rolled.

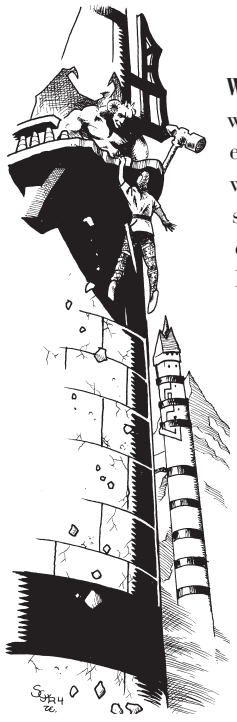
Shrug it Off — Faced with the pain and discomfort of cuts and scrapes, a player may choose to have his character Shrug Off +1 Ob of wound penalties. Basically, this temporarily mitigates the effects of a single superficial wound. This is exactly the same as the Shrug it Off rules in the Injury, Treatment and Recovery section, except that no Health test is necessary, and the time required is reduced to one action.

Persona

Boon— A player may choose to spend up to three persona points on a skill or stat test. Each point spent grants a bonus die (+1D) to roll on the test. A Boon must be announced before the dice are cast.

Grit Your Teeth— For a persona point, -1D of wound penalty can be temporarily shrugged off. This is exactly the same as the Grit Your Teeth mechanics in the Injury, Treatment and Recovery section, except that no Health test is required, and the time is reduced. Even spending a persona point, Gritting Your Teeth during a Fight costs two actions, and one action during Range and Cover.

Focus— A player may spend a persona point if he fails his test when using the working carefully rules. This doesn't pass the test, but it does counteract the effect of a time complication.



Will to Live— Players whose characters have been struck down with a mortal wound must spend a persona point in order to earn the Will to Live. The player decides whether or not he wants to continue on with his character. If the player does not spend a persona point, then no art nor magic can save the character from the mortal wound: He has exhausted his life. If the persona point is spent, then the character is allowed to attempt a Recovery test against the mortal wound after being tended to. See the Anatomy of Injury.

Deeds

Divine Inspiration— One point of deeds artha may be spent to double the exponent of a single stat, skill or attribute test. Reflexes and equipment dice may not be doubled in this manner. When spending a deeds point on a test that gains additional dice from FoRKs, helping, stances or other means, only double the base skill/stat and then add in the extra dice. Divine Inspiration must be announced before the dice are cast.

Saving Grace—A deeds point may be spent to reroll all dice that failed to come up successes on any given test. This may be used for equipment dice like armor, shields and guns. Obviously, Saving Grace is announced after the dice have been rolled.

Spending Limits

Players may only spend 1 fate, 1-3 persona points and 1-2 deeds points per roll. (2 deeds would come from doubling your dice and then rerolling traitors.)

Optional Rule: Persona Point Complications

If a character has just failed a test and gotten himself into deep trouble—killed, captured or something similarly horrible—the player can spend a persona point to redirect the narrative from "certain death" into further complications. As a rule, the player may choose his new fate. It's got to be bad or costly, though. Otherwise, the GM can simply declare that the initial failed test result stands.

A ranger sneaks into a bandit camp to investigate. His player fails the roll miserably and thus his character will surely be caught. To mitigate his failure, the player spends a persona point on a complication. As the bandits come out to investigate, they find a bow and quiver hanging curiously on a thin branch!

Convinced that they are being spied on, they search the area around camp, forcing the ranger to take refuge in the cesspit in order to avoid detection.

Complications must have a tangible cost. For martial or physical tests, that cost should be material, as in the ranger's bow in the above example. Or, for example, a player can spend a persona point on a failed Block test to ward off a Superb blow. The blow is deflected, but his sword snaps.

Or it can be even more complicated: A player's knight is about to be crushed under the weight of a troll's hammer. He's failed his Avoid miserably. "Can I spend a persona point to duck the blow, but to have stumbled back and nearly fallen from the ledge? My character would have dropped his sword, and he'd be hanging on for his life as the troll advances. How's that?"

The GM raises his eyebrow. "Sure!"

For social or academic tests, the relationship to the subject must change—it must get complicated. Remember, the test is still a failure; the player does not get what he's after, but he mitigates disaster by spending a persona point. He may then narrate the complication. The purpose of this mechanic is to give the player a little more control over his miserable fate.

There can only be one complication per session per player.

Aristeia

An *Aristeia* is slightly different and much more significant than the other artha feats. In order to enter Aristeia, a character must spend 5 fate points, 3 persona points and 1 deeds point. Once the artha is spent, choose the form of the Aristeia from the choices below:

Minor Epiphany—A player may choose to shade-shift one of his stats or skills one shade lighter for the duration of an entire scene—a fight, a goal, a gauntlet, an argument, etc.

Divine Aura (**Aristeia**)— By calling on this divine favor, a character may ignore all wound or other subtracted die penalties while he accomplishes one simple goal. The goal must be defined when the Aristeia is summoned. "To escape," "To win this battle" and "To sway the court to my side" are all fine and appropriate goals. Goals like "To kill my enemy" last only so long as the opponents are locked in combat. If the enemy manages to disengage, the Aristeia is lost.

Artha and Advancement

Just a reminder: Dice from artha never count toward the "total dice rolled" number when determining the difficulty of tests for advancement.

Epiphany

By embodying his persona, truly fulfilling his destiny and moving beyond his bounds, a character may undergo an Epiphany—a permanent shade-shift of one of the character's stats or skills.

In order to earn this fantastic boon, a player must push and test one of his character's abilities past its limits. Not only must the ability in question be used at critical junctures in the story, but the player must spend artha on those tests.

To shift to the next lighter shade, a player must spend a total of 3 deeds points, 10 persona points and 20 fate points. If a player has spent this much artha on one of his character's abilities, then the ability immediately and permanently takes on its new shade.

Other Artha Expenditures

Artha spent for an Aristeia counts for an epiphany. Spending artha on armor does not help with an epiphany. Spending fate and persona to shrug or grit a superficial or light wound counts toward a Health epiphany. Spending artha for special effects involving emotional attributes counts toward an epiphany for the emotional attribute and not the ability tested.

Artha and Game Play

As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, artha is the game play interface for Burning Wheel. You act and are rewarded; you choose

which actions are important enough to be rewarded. Not only does it mediate the relationship between player and GM, but it also helps set the tone for the game as a whole.

How Much?

At the end of a session, each player should earn at least a fate point and a persona point: one fate from playing a Belief, Instinct or trait and a persona from accomplishing a goal or earning one of the session awards.

A player who is really on his game can earn fate from each Belief and Instinct, and maybe a few from traits and Right Skill Right Time. That could be eight fate in one session! Or a player could accomplish three goals and earn three persona points, plus artha from Instincts and session awards.

If no artha is earned in a session, something is wrong. Players and GM are not engaging with the system and everyone is missing out on a lot of good stuff. Next session, examine your Beliefs and try to align them better with the story so your character is driving the action.

Starting Artha

I recommend each character start with one fate and one persona point.

If you'd like a bigger cushion for a starting game, try starting characters with three fate and two persona.

You can start characters with a deeds point if you'd like a very heroic, epic feeling game. I don't recommend this, though. I think deeds points are best when earned.

NPC Artha

Named villains and allies should start with one fate and one persona point each. Thereafter, they can earn artha if the GM writes and plays beliefs for them.

Archnemesis characters should be given at least three fate and three persona.

I advise against giving villains deeds points. Burning Wheel is meant to be a player driven game, and deeds points are rewards for actual game play. No matter what we'd like to think, those villains haven't played the game. There's little more demoralizing to the players than hearing the GM announce, "The Giant King doubles his G6 Hammer skill."

Artha in Brief

Spending Artha

Name	Cost/Type	Effect
Luck	1 *Fate*	Open-ends 6s
Shrug it Off	1 *Fate*	Temporarily negates +1 Ob penalty
Boon	1 *Persona*	+1D to a stat or skill for one test; max three points per roll
Focus	1 *Persona*	Counter a time complication
Grit Your Teeth	1 *Persona*	Temporarily negates -1D wound penalty
Will to Live	1 *Persona*	Allows player to test Health so their character may recover from a mortal wound
Divine Inspiration	1 *Deeds*	Double dice for one test
Saving Grace	1 *Deeds*	Reroll failed dice from one test
Aristeia	5 F, 3 P, 1 D	Gray skill/stat, or ignore wound penalties
***Optional*: Complication**	1 *Persona*	Cheat death!

Earning Artha

Name	Earns/Type	Description
Belief	1 *Fate*	Driving the game forward with a Belief
Instinct	1 *Fate*	Playing an Instinct that makes the character's life difficult
Trait	1 *Fate*	Invoking a trait that sends the story in an unforeseen direction
Humor	1 *Fate*	For an in-character game-stopper
Right Skill, Right Time	1 *Fate*	For having a skill to make the story go
Embodiment	1 *Persona*	For really good or distinctive roleplaying
Moldbreaker	1 *Persona*	For going beyond the bounds of character
Workhorse	1 *Persona*	For doing all the work for the scenario
MVP	1 *Persona*	For being the crucial element of success
Personal Goals	1 *Persona*	Revenge, triumph, seduction, victory
Greater Goals	1 *Deeds*	Accomplishing goals bigger than you!
Beyond the Call	1 *Deeds*	Helping, no matter the cost

The Spokes in Play

Vincent's Admonition

In his game, *Dogs in the Vineyard*, Vincent Baker articulates a convention of Burning Wheel so well that I'd rather use his words than my own. He says:

Every moment of play, roll dice or say "yes."

If nothing is at stake, say "yes" [to the player's request], whatever they're doing. Just go along with them. If they ask for information, give it to them. If they have their characters go somewhere, they're there. If they want it, it's theirs.

Sooner or later—sooner, because [your game's] pregnant with crisis—they'll have their characters do something that someone else won't like. Bang! Something's at stake. Start the conflict and roll the dice.

Roll dice, or say "yes."

Vincent's advice is perfect for Burning Wheel. Unless there is something at stake in the story you have created, don't bother with the dice. Keep moving, keep describing, keep roleplaying. But as soon as a character wants something that he doesn't have, needs to know something he doesn't know, covets something that someone else has, roll the dice.

Flip that around and it reveals a fundamental rule in Burning Wheel game play: When there is conflict, roll the dice. There is no social agreement for the resolution of conflict in this game. Roll the dice and let the obstacle system guide the outcome. Success or failure doesn't really matter. So long as the intent of the task is clearly stated, the story is going somewhere.

Setting Obstacles

It is the GM's role to set obstacles. By presenting obstacles where he sees fit—by calling for tests—he builds the mood of the game. For example, making even the simple things difficult can give the game an air of oppression and weight. This isn't a bad thing, and sometimes that's the mood necessary for conveying the situation. Setting obstacles low, or only asking for tests at moments of high drama, gives the game a heroic and grandiose feel.

The players have some role in setting this mood, but by far it is the GM's job to sculpt, pace and nudge the atmosphere in a certain direction. And not just through beautiful descriptions, he uses the game mechanics to reinforce those descriptions.

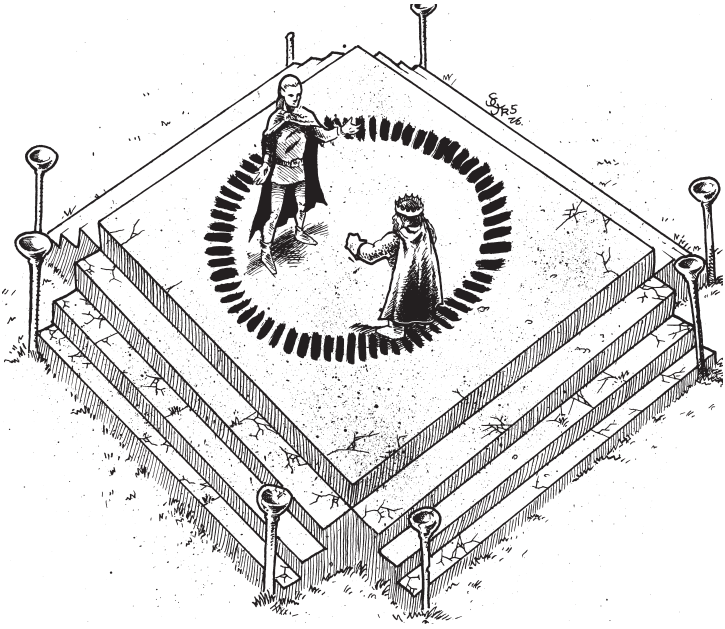
Versus Tests Revisited

Whenever there is a contest between two characters, make a versus test. This is the method of solving disputes in Burning Wheel: We roll for it. Two players want their characters to grab something? We roll to see who gets it. One player wants his character to hurt another? We make a versus test—attack vs defense. Attacker gets more successes, he injures his target. Defender gets more successes, and he protects himself. Now what's he going to do? Want to remain hidden in a crowd? Roll. I'm going to roll to spot you. Want to win an argument? We roll after we've each stated our case.

By using versus tests to resolve conflicts, we keep the game fair, the action moving, and allow the players a chance to legitimately influence events. Players can spend artha on rolls: They can call for help, use traits, use FoRKs and just plain do the unexpected. All of this is necessary for an evolving, engaging game. The players are both the actors and the audience, so they need to be involved in, and enjoying, the events as they transpire. Versus tests go a long way toward creating an engaging experience.

Why roll at all? Why not just agree on what's happening? We're all fair-minded adults, right? Well, social agreement is a fantastic ideal, but it is subject to bullying, blustering, intimidation, manipulation, cajoling, persuasion and lying: all things that are separate from the characters—part of a social dynamic that is apart from the game. By relying on the dice, everyone is on a level playing field. Burning Wheel is a game, not acting class. The versus tests get everyone playing the game. Besides, your characters only advance if you roll the dice!

Roll, and you'll find that dice in Burning Wheel actually support and bolster the players' actions—even if they fail! Dice help you get what you want, not frustrate your goals. There's a process to it, sure, but I'm confident that the mechanics of this game drive dramatic, intense play. Roll the dice. You'll see.



Make Characters and Play Now

At this point, I strongly urge you to make a character. Get a friend or two together, and take the system you've just read for a spin. Nothing big; a small, one-goal scenario would be best. Play out social and physical altercations using the versus tests rules. Get some tests for advancement and some artha from the stingy GM. As questions arise about detailed resolution, make a few notes and, after the game, start reading through the chapters in the Rim of the Wheel.